The Selection

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Summary

Returning home on the tail end of an injury that ends his dancing career, Yuri Katsuki is trying to find his future again. As a Five, he knows his options are limited, but when he finds an invitation to Crown Prince Victor Nikiforov's Selection, he is convinced by a friend to apply.

He never thought he'd be Selected.

When he is, he finds that his world is changed forever, and that the Crown Prince is not exactly what he'd expected.

Notes

Sooo... I said I would take a week off to recharge. That... Didn't happen.

Welcome to The Selection! I have based this story off the works of Kiera Cass. Some of the
scenes will be a bit familiar, especially in the beginning, but this is a story just set in that universe. It will not follow the same storyline as the books and will diverge fairly quickly.

For those who are not familiar, the fictional country of Illea is based loosely off The United States several hundred years in the future where a caste system has been implemented and we've gone back to a monarchy. The population has been sorted into castes from One (the royal family) to Eight (the homeless and criminals). There are set job paths and expectations for each caste. As it was never clearly stated in the books exactly all the kinds of artists and entertainers that a Five could be, I went ahead and took some liberties.

Without further ado, ENJOY!
Standing in front of his parent’s house for the first time in five years, Yuri Katsuki let out a loud sigh.

Not a sigh of relief, but still a halfhearted release of tension none the less. Just because he wanted to be literally anywhere but here in this moment, didn’t mean he shouldn’t try to put on a happy face. He shifted around on his feet on the sidewalk and tried a smile.

He didn’t have to be able to see his own face to know how false it must look.

Logically he knew he should be proud of his accomplishments. As a Five, he should be grateful for whatever time at the top of the world he’d been given, but the burn of failure still settled uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach. No matter how many times he told himself it wasn’t personal, at twenty-two he’d held out longer than anyone had expected against dancers who were younger and far more beautiful than he, the words felt empty and hollow.

What was he supposed to do now?

That wasn’t a fair question and Yuri knew it. It was obvious what he was going to do now. He was going to go home, move back in with his family and take jobs dancing to entertain those at private parties and other functions. It was too late for him to learn another artistic trade, and he’d never been much good at the less physical options available to him like painting or playing an instrument. All he’d ever wanted to do was dance. For five years, he’d danced with the premier dance company in Illéa, but now his time with them was at an end, so there was nothing else for it.

Yuri had to return home and press onwards in one way or another. His family depended on it.

Sitting out here worrying himself into a blind panic wasn’t going to change anything. The sooner he got this part over with, the sooner he could move forward.

He hadn’t realized he’d been praying that most of the residents of his home were out until he knocked and didn’t hear the thunder of several pairs of feet all rushing to try and answer the door.
Yuri shuffled nervously on the front stoop as he waited. He did have a key stashed somewhere in the bag he was wheeling behind him, but something felt off about using it. Like being gone for this long meant this was no longer truly his home and he had no right to just let himself in.

So he waited.

About a minute later the door opened and revealed his mother standing on the other side.

“Yuri! Oh, you should have called. I would have come to pick you up from the train station. You didn’t have to walk so far!” Hiroko was smiling brightly as she adjusted the circular frames on her face. Her hands were covered in fleck of drying clay and Yuri knew he had pulled her away from her studio in order to let him in. Despite his earlier conviction when it came to not using his own key, he couldn’t stop the spike of guilt from pulling her away from her work just because he was being an insecure idiot. “I told your father that you would be coming in the afternoon and not the evening, but he was so convinced!”

“It’s not Dad’s fault, Mom.” Yuri was glad she hadn’t tried to hug him. He didn’t think he would be able to handle feeling her soft arms around him right then without breaking into tears. Instead, she simply moved out of the way and waved for him to follow her into the house. “There was a spot on an earlier train so I took it. I should have called. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We’re just happy to have you home. We’ve missed you.”

With the way she was looking at him, all soft and warm, Yuri was almost able to bring himself to believe her.

“I’ve missed you, too.” Yuri said, and he meant it. It had never been easy, being away from those who had been his support system for most of his life and the pain never had faded. “Where… Where can I put my things?”

“The triplets are in your old room, but your sister agreed to clear her painting supplies out of the attic and we’ve made you up a bed there.” Hiroko placed her hand on Yuri’s shoulder. He felt the warmth seeping through the thin layer of his sweater and into his skin. He let the feeling ground him. Bring him back to five years before when he had been young and scared and ready to step out into the unknown where there were no guarantees. His mother had been there for him then and she was here for him now. “We’ve left the windows open so hopefully most of the paint smell has aired out by now.”
“If it hasn’t, that’s fine. You didn’t have to do all this for me.” Yuri was far past the point of being picky. He’d sleep in a tent in the yard if he had to in an effort not to put anyone else out.

“We did it because we wanted to. You’re family, Yuri. Our only son.” Hiroko removed her hand, gesturing for Yuri to follow her towards the stairs. “We are so proud of you. I know… I know it didn’t end well, but we couldn’t be prouder.”

“Thank you, Mom.” Yuri smiled then, one that was bordering on real. “I promise I won’t be a burden. My knee already feels better and the doctors gave me plenty of instructions for finishing out my rehab. I’ll be booking gigs by the end of the month, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. I know you will come back from this better than ever.”

Yuri waved her off as she tried to follow him up the stairs, claiming he’d like to lie down for a bit before the rest of his family returned home. She hugged him then, a quick one, and he let her do it. He never had been one for physical contact, but he figured she deserved it. Now that he didn’t have a steady income to contribute to the household, he could give her the physical contact she craved since he could no longer ensure the financial support he’d given them before.

Feeling the last of his energy draining out of him, he left his suitcase by the door and tossed his messenger bag onto a desk that had been pushed by the single window under the peaked eaves. He paused, glancing outside for a moment, fingernail digging into a fleck of dried paint that stained the surface of the desk. The sun was shining and the light coming in from the window was warm and felt like summer. Halfway down the street there was a group of children sprawled out on the sidewalk with chalk, chattering away as they drew everything from detailed pictures to random swirls and shapes.

Pictures that would stay for hours, maybe even a day. Perhaps until it rained again. Then they would be washed away as though they were never there.

It was kind of poetic really. The way some silly chalk drawings were such an apt metaphor for his life.

Turning from the window, Yuri moved to lie down on the bed. He lay flat on his back and brought his right leg up so that his fingers were laced around his shin and his knee was pressed tightly against his chest. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes as he felt the burn in the healing tendons and muscles. He fought through the pain, holding the stretch until he couldn’t any longer and then slowly relaxing his leg straight out once more.
He plucked the glasses from his face and placed them gingerly onto the bedpost by his ear. He grabbed his left leg and repeated the process, sighing in relief as this leg continued to yield nothing more than the familiar stretch of muscles that were strong and well used.

He’d taken a risk five years ago. Agreeing to sign with the dance company. He had been lured by the vast stage, the bright lights, the generous paychecks he could send home to support his family. He’d known that someday it would all go away. He’d known, but he had thought he would have more time. That he could dance for a few more years, maybe enough to bolster his savings in order to buy his way into being a Four. As a Four he could have stayed. He could have been an instructor or a choreographer.

As a Five he was nothing more than an average dancer that was teetering on the edge of being too old to matter. Blowing out his knee two months ago had been the final straw.

Yuri supposed he should have been grateful they hadn’t sent him home right away. They could have. They had every right to. His contract didn’t protect his position from injury. They had even allowed him access to the company’s doctor without docking the fees from his pay. For that, at least, he would be forever grateful.

It had only been when his physical therapist had reported that he wasn’t likely to be able to hold up to the strain of four performances a week ever again that the decision had been made to let him go.

Who was he now? Not a dancer, not really. Not in the way he would have to be. He couldn’t sing, couldn’t paint, any prior attempts at learning an instrument had been disastrous at best, he didn’t have the patience required for working with clay, and the thought of him taking up writing was laughable at best.

Who was Yuri Katsuki when he couldn’t dance?

Nobody.

Yuri let his left leg fall next to his right. He dug the palms of his hands into the sensitive skin right below his eyes.

Who would want him now?
It had been strange coming down to dinner that evening. He had drifted off even though he hadn’t intended to, the stress of the past week and traveling pulling him down into slumber before he’d known what was happening.

Now, however, he was wide awake and rooted to the spot by a set of triplets attaching themselves to his calves.

“Yuri’s home! Yuri’s home!” One of the girls, the one with a blue bow in her hair, rubbed his face against his good knee as she squealed.

“Yes? I am?” Yuri didn’t know what to do. The girls had been one when he left. Sure, they had spoken from time to time when he would call home and he wrote them letters and had hung onto their crayon drawings, pinning them to the wall of his dorm room, but he there was no way they could really remember him as someone to be this excited about.

“Come on, girls, let him go.” Hiroko was standing in the doorway from the kitchen to the dining room and the girls gave him one last squeeze, he had to use every last ounce of will power not to wince as the one with the pink bow grabbed his injured knee in a way that caused a lance of pain to shoot up it and right into his skull. “They’ve been so excited ever since they heard you were coming home. They’ve all decided to be dancers, you know.”

“Yeah! We want to be able to be as graceful as you one day!” The one with the yellow bow popped up onto her tippy toes and arced her arms over her head.

“I’m sure you will be one day, Lutz.” Mari breezed into the room, and pat the girl on her head as she went. She paused as she caught sight of Yuri, her smile softening and she wiped her hands off on her paint splattered overalls and held one out for him to shake. “Yuri, it’s been awhile. How are you?”

“I’m fine.” Yuri took the proffered hand and shook it, glad Mari was keeping the contact to a minimum. She always had been the most respectful of his need for space. “How have you been, sister?”

“Well. I’ve had a few new commissions come in this week. Hopefully they will lead to more.” Mari smirked and moved as Yuri’s father was now trying to get into the room behind her. Glancing down
to the see the triplets were now squabbling over who was going to get to sit next to Yuri, she frowned. “Axel! Lutz! Loop! No one is sitting next to him if you are going to behave like that. Go set the table.”

“Yes, sister!” They chirped in unison and tripped over each other as they hurried to do as Mari said.

“Don’t worry. You get used to them.” Toshiya smiled, but didn’t approach Yuri. “It is good to have you home again, son. A phone call a week and a handful of letters just weren’t enough.”

Another pang of guilt. Yuri knew he hadn’t been the most communicative in his absence, but he had justified it by reminding himself that he was busy. Rehearsals and their demanding show schedule had been a good excuse. Now… Now it felt like it had all been a waste. Time sacrificed for a dream that never would come true.

“I’m sorry. I should have called more or…”

“Yuri!” Hiroko was back, and this time she had a cream-colored envelope in her hands. Even from a distance the paper screamed money and luxury and Yuri frowned. “Before I forget. This came for you two days ago. Thank goodness you never got around to updating your address on the National Register when you left home or else you might have missed it!”

“For me?” Yuri accepted the envelope with no small amount of confusion. No one ever wrote to him here. He only ever received letters from his family. Noting the return address, Yuri’s eyes widened and he felt his heart catch in his throat. “There must be some mistake. There is no way this is for me. They must have meant to put Mari’s name.”

“No, it is definitely for you.” Hiroko clapped her hands together happily.

“Mom, this looks like an invitation to a Selection… It can’t be for me.” Yuri tried to hand it back, wanting the heavy weight out of his hands. His mother shook her head and took a step back, hands raised in the air.

“You don’t know?” Mari had an eyebrow arched and she was looking at Yuri like he wasn’t getting the punchline to a particularly obvious joke. “Have you been living under a rock or something?”

“No… But I didn’t exactly watch a lot of TV over the past few weeks while I was in recovery.”
Yuri’s hands were trembling now. This couldn’t be right. If the Crown Prince was ready to hold his Selection, this letter should not have come to him.

“They announced it two weeks ago. Crown Prince Victor has decided to have a male only Selection!” Hiroko giggled. “First one since his great-grandfather before him. The tabloids always did hint that he might have his affections lie either way… Open it! See for yourself!”

Yuri did not want to open it. In fact, he wished it was cold enough for there to be a fire burning in the hearth because the only thing he wanted to do was burn the offending letter and pretend he’d never seen it. Since burning it wasn’t an option and crumpling it into a ball wouldn’t be destructive enough, he simply ran his thumb over the raised lettering in bold, black, elegant script.

‘Mr. Yuri Katsuki.’

This had to be a mistake.

“Open it!” The triplet with the blue bow… Loop? Yuri still couldn’t tell them apart. Whichever one it was, she had noticed what was holding the adults’ attention and was now bouncing around in front of him, eyes wide. “We want to see it, too!”

As much as he didn’t want to, all eyes were on him now. What other choice did he have?

Yuri flipped the envelope over and slid his thumbnail under the flap, carefully breaking the seal. With that done, he gingerly pulled the thick paper out and unfolded the letter within.

He couldn’t breathe.

It wasn’t a mistake. There it was, in black and white. His name in bold at the top and a paragraph underneath informing him that Crown Prince Victor Nikiforov had invoked Article 34 of Illéa’s Constitution to hold a male only Selection. Yuri’s name was on the list of eligible males aged 18-26 and explained where he could go to return the enclosed application should he wish to put himself forward for possible Selection.

“You’re going to do it, right?” Mari was watching him carefully even as his mother and father were clearly barely containing their enthusiasm. “Send in the application?”
“I… I don’t know.” And Yuri didn’t know. He really didn’t. “Probably not.”

“You should!” The triplets yelled in unison.

“We would cheer for you!” Axel, Yuri now remembered the one in the pink bow was Axel, bounced up and down at his feet. “You would win for sure!”

“I doubt that. There are so many that would apply. I wouldn’t even be chosen.” Yuri shuffled the papers so that the first page of the application was on top. Most of his personal information had already been filled in for him. Everything that could have been found on the National Register. The blank spots for him to put more details stared up at him as though mocking them with their blankness. What the hell did his favorite color even have to do with this? “I’ll have to think about it.”

“The deadline isn’t for another two weeks. You have plenty of time to think about it, dear.” Yuri’s mother smiled sweetly at him before turning back to the triplets. “As exciting as that was, who is ready for dinner?”

As the room burst into motion once more, Yuri didn’t say that his decision was already close to being made. They could have their excitement for however long they wanted. It would fade eventually.

There was no way in hell he was going to send that application in.

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Two weeks later found Yuri sitting on the curb in front of his house, head in his hands and mind whirring at a million miles a minute.

Nothing had gone like he thought it would. Not that he’d had high expectations by any means, but he’d been hoping something good would happen to him. Sighing, he raised his head and rested his chin on where he had his knees curled up to his chest. The fingers on his right hand fiddled with the Velcro of his knee brace and he bit the inside of his cheek as he tried to bully his thoughts back into some kind of rational order.

The last thing he wanted was for someone to find him crying in the middle of the road.
His meager savings were already dwindling and it was coming time for him to give his parents their usual payment. He wasn’t going to have it. Wasn’t even going to come close. No one wanted to book him. No one wanted a dancer who showed up in a brace and who was limited in what they could and couldn’t do. He’d thought maybe *someone*…

No, it didn’t matter what he’d thought then. Didn’t matter that he had been pinning his hopes on the pity of a stranger. The present was weighing down on top of him and he wasn’t any closer to figuring out where he could go from here.

“Yuri!”

He jolted, sitting upright and turning to find a girl around his age with brown hair pulled up into a messy bun and a wide smile on her face as she jogged in his general direction. He bit back a groan, but didn’t rise to his feet, instead waiting as the girl dropped down to sit next to him, her brown eyes sparkling as she looked at him.

“Yuko.” Yuri forced himself to smile. Despite his bad mood, he was happy to see her. Like everyone else, he’d communicated with his childhood friend through letters and the occasional phone call. He hadn’t realized until this very moment how much he had missed her presence in his life. How she could help raise his mood simply by being there. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” Yuko seemed like her usual cheerful self. It was nice to see that some things never did change. “I would have come sooner, but it seems like half of the Twos and Threes in this town are all wanting to do their spring cleaning at the same time. I should have told them to stuff it.”

“It’s fine. I wouldn’t want you to pass up work on my behalf.” Yuri stated forcefully.

As Fives, his family would be able to scrape together enough for a time even without Yuri’s income to supplement them for the time being. Mari’s paintings always fetched a decent price and Hiroko made plenty of odds and ends with her pottery to fill some of the gaps when Toshiya had difficulty finding a publisher for his short stories or poems. As a Six, Yuko didn’t have the luxury of passing up an opportunity for work.

He noted the silver band on her left ring finger. Especially not when her husband was working late hours at the massive distribution center downtown.
Noticing where his gaze had fallen, Yuko lifted her hand up so the band caught the light. “Pretty isn’t it? Takeshi still won’t tell me what it cost. We wanted to wait until we had enough money to apply for him to be a Five, but we just couldn’t do it any longer. There’s never enough.”

“Do you miss it?” Yuri couldn’t stop the question from tumbled out of his mouth and he felt his face grow hot even as he pushed on. “Being a Five? Singing and dancing at parties?”

“Of course.” There was a slip in her mood, an emotion Yuri couldn’t quite place flashing through her eyes before they became dull and guarded. “I miss it, but I wouldn’t ask for it back. Not if it meant losing him. We’ve… We’ve already lost so much.”

“The girls are doing well. They talk about you all the time. When they aren’t talking about me, that is.” Yuri hoped his words would bring her comfort. He knew how much it had hurt for her to let them go. “They are happy.”

“Yes, they are.” Yuko took a deep breath and plastered her usual happy grin across her face once more. She leaned forward, catching sight of something resting in a pile on the pavement at Yuri’s side. “Oh! Is that…?”

Before he could stop her or even really understand what she had been trying to do, Yuko leant across him and grabbed the pile of papers.

“It is! Yuri, you still haven’t gone down to the Community Center to turn this in yet? The deadline’s today!” Yuri scrambled to try and grab the application back, but he failed. Yuko always had been too quick for him. “You’ve filled it out already, so what are you waiting for?”

“Nothing. I’m just not submitting it.” Yuri shrugged and curled in on himself, hoping that by making himself a smaller target, Yuko might let it go. From the way she was looking at him, he had to say she was not going to drop it no matter how much he begged. “Yuko, why would I? I wouldn’t be picked in the first place and, even if I was, I would just embarrass myself and my entire family.”

“Or you could end up marrying the love of your life.” Yuko poked him in the side as he grumbled curses under his breath. “You’ve had a crush on Prince Victor for years. Why would you want to give up the chance to marry him?”

“Who doesn’t have a crush on Victor Nikiforov?” Yuri asked sullenly. It was true. The entire country had fallen in love with their Crown Prince, and it was easy to see why.
Victor was, to put it bluntly, beautiful. Silver hair that had fall down to his waist when he had been a teenager, and that didn’t look any less soft and shiny now that it was cut short, and blue eyes that pierced through the television screen and made Yuri feel like the prince was right there in the room and staring into Yuri’s very soul. He was always smiling, always had that twinkle in his eye as though he was in on the world’s funniest joke at all times. Even his voice on the evening reports was enough to send grown women and men alike into a near swoon.

Not that Yuri would ever admit he swooned to the sound of Victor Nikiforov’s voice. At least, not out loud.

Throw in the fact that he was the Crown Prince and the future King of Illéa… Yes, Yuri definitely did not stand a chance against literally half of the entire country. Why set himself up for any more heartbreak than he already had?

Yuko let him stew in sullen silence for a moment before getting to her feet, tugging his upper arm and dragging him with her.

“Yuri? Do you remember when you first received the invitation to dance with the National Ballet?” Yuri frowned, but he nodded. “Do you remember how hard it was to make that decision? How long you agonized over it? How you were dead convinced it was some kind of mistake and that even if you did accept they would send you packing within the week?”

Yuri sighed. Of course, he remembered. All that stress had led to the worst panic attack of his entire life. It was kind of difficult to forget at least that part of it. He nodded again.

“Do you regret accepting?”

That was the million dollar question, wasn’t it?

“I don’t know. Sometimes?” Yuri shrugged. “This isn’t that, Yuko. It’s not even close to that.”

“I think it is. Sometimes I think you forget that the National Ballet didn’t send you home within the first week. You were there for five years.” Yuko was pulling on his arm and practically dragging him down the street now. “They only sent you home when you hurt yourself so badly it would ruin your body to continue. That is not the kind of reaction people in power tend to have when faced with someone they don’t want.”
Yuri found it was kind of hard to argue with that.

“Where are we going?” Yuri was stumbling to keep up with the brutal pace Yuko was setting. Practically a jog.

“You know exactly where we’re going. The Community Center doesn’t close for another hour yet. We’ve got just enough time to make it.” Yuko gave a harder tug on his wrist. “Unless you can tell me you do have regrets about taking a leap of faith before, I’m going to make sure you do it again. Besides, if you didn’t really want this, you wouldn’t have filled out the application in the first place.”

“Yuko…” Yuri wanted to protest. Wanted to remind his friend that things were different now. Maybe if this opportunity had come last year he would have thought about it. Maybe he would have been able to find the courage to do this. Now…?

“Nope. You don’t have a choice.” Yuko slowed and then came to a stop, dropping Yuri’s arm and turning to face him with her hands on her hips. “You might be right. You might not even get chosen, but you are going to beat yourself up your entire life if you don’t at least give it a try. Don’t you dare set yourself up for a lifetime of ‘what ifs’.”

Even though he didn’t want to, he had to admit she was right. It was part of why he’d filled out the papers in the first place, even if he hadn’t been convinced he was actually going to send them. If he didn’t at least put his name in the hat, he was going to spend the rest of his life watching Prince Victor and the man he’d chosen go about their lives always wondering if that spot at the prince’s side could have been his.

“Fine. Let’s go. Quickly. Before I change my mind.” Yuri rolled his eyes as Yuko clapped her hands and reached out to begin pulling him down the street again.

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One week later Yuri found himself sandwiched on the couch between his sister and his mother while they prepared to watch The Report that Friday evening. Adjusting his glasses every so often and practically gnawing a hole through his cheek, Yuri struggle to focus.

Tonight was the night they were going to announce the Selected.
Logically he knew there was no way he would be picked. Sure, there was usually a token Five or two thrown into the mix, but the vast majority of candidates would be a Four or above. That, and he hadn’t realized when he’d been forcibly drug to the Community Center that there would be a photograph to go along with his submission.

He definitely had not been prepared to have his picture taken.

For a lack of something better to do, Yuko had helped him push his hair back with the assistance of a bit of gel one of the clerks had stashed in her desk drawer and they had decided to forgo glasses in the interest of not risking a glare across the lenses. He didn’t have to see the picture to know it wouldn’t have been his best. He was nervous, trying desperately not to squint in order to make the blurry shapes in the room come into clearer focus, and he was pretty sure he’d barely managed a smirk much less a smile.

If there was any truth in the rumors that the chosen thirty-four suitors for the prince’s heart weren’t going to be randomly generated as promised, but shifted through with an eye for what the prince might like, he wasn’t going to stand a chance.

Yuri wasn’t sure if that thought relieved or upset him.

When the theme music burst out of the tinny speakers on the small television his parents had scrounged up when Yuri had been in middle school, Yuri felt the blood rush out of his face fast enough that he was left completely dizzy.

“Good evening and welcome to this week’s edition of The Report!” The regular host was grinning from ear to ear and the triplets, who were lying on their stomachs in a pile on the floor at Yuri’s feet squealed so loudly he almost missed the next words. “As I am sure everyone is painfully aware, tonight we will be finding out which lucky gentlemen will get the once in a lifetime opportunity to court our beloved Crown Prince Victor Nikiforov. Prince Victor, are you excited to see who has been Selected for you?”

The camera cut over to where Victor was sitting between King Yakov and Queen Lilia, lounging in his chair as though he didn’t have a care in the world. Yuri’s breath caught in his throat.

“I’ve been looking forward to this for weeks!” Victor smiled in that way that never failed to cause a shiver to run up Yuri’s spine. To counteract this, he huddled in on himself. He felt Mari nudge in him the ribs and he scowled in her general direction. “Father has been very hush-hush about the whole
process. He wouldn’t even let me get a tiny peek!”

The host laughed. “I would think not. So, we’re to take that to mean tonight will be the first time you see the faces of your potential husband-to-bes?”

“Naturally. I’ll be just as surprised as everyone else!”

Then Victor winked directly into the camera and Yuri was pretty sure his soul fled his body.

He sat there in a daze as the host took back the spotlight, promising to come back to this thrilling topic at the end of the show, once the regularly scheduled updated were done.

“Too bad you didn’t put your name in, son. If you had we could be seeing your face up there in a bit.” Toshiya had settled in the threadbare armchair in the corner of the room. He’d been reading the paper before the show started, and he now had it folded in his lap.

“Yuri! You didn’t send in your application?” Hiroko twisted around in her seat and looked over at Yuri in shock and surprise. “I thought Yuko said…”

Of course, Yuko would have told his mother. He’d been hoping she wouldn’t. That way no one would have to know he’d even been in the running when his name wasn’t called.

“I did.” Yuri mumbled, speaking up when Mari elbowed him in the ribs again. “I did send it in! Ouch, Mari. Jesus.”

“Sorry, it was just a smidge difficult to hear you, little brother.” Mari’s smirk caused Yuri’s irritated frown to deepen. “I am impressed, though. I thought you would chicken out.”

“Well, I didn’t.” Yuri shot back. He might not have necessarily wanted to do it, but he had. That was still something to proud of. He took a deep breath to steady himself. “Not that it’s going to matter. There must be thousands of boys in our province that applied.”

“Nonsense. You have just as good a chance as those other boys. A better one even.” Hiroko slapped him lightly on his upper arm. “I’ll bet none of those boys have danced for the National Ballet.”
“Mom…” Yuri buried his face in his hands to hide his blush.

The wait felt interminable. Yuri didn’t care at all about budget projections, the state of the nation’s crops, or the latest report of what the rebels that lived on the outskirts of society may or may not have done to a shipment of apples bound for the capital. All he cared about was confirming he hadn’t been Selected so he could move back to figuring out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

Finally, it was time.

“Now, it is time to throw it over to our special guest host. You might remember him from our coverage of the Royal Ball last Christmas. Please welcome the face of the Selection, Hisashi Morooka!”

The crowd in the studio clapped enthusiastically and the triplets began to squeal again as the Asian man stepped out of the wings and onto the stage, taking the spotlight graciously. Mari quickly shushed them and the whole house fell silent as they waited.

“Are you ready to see your future, Your Highness?” Morooka asked, angling his body toward the prince. Victor grinned eagerly and leant forward.

“I can’t wait. Don’t leave me hanging any longer. I don’t think my heart can bear it.”

They both laughed and Morooka gestured to a large screen as they turned to see where the pictures would be displayed.

“Without further ado! Let’s meet the Selected!”

It felt like an out of body experience listening as names and caste numbers were read and faces flashed across the screen. Victor’s face was always kept firmly in the frame, but he was as difficult to read as always. Polite, smiling, but so distant.

Yuri swallowed thickly. He wiped off his sweaty palms on his jeans and went back to fidgeting. Out of the corner of his eye he was painfully aware of his sister watching him, eyebrow raised and looking as though she was more than ready to tease him as soon as their province was announced.
“And the Selected from Carolina is a Five. Mr. Yuri Katsuki!”

The only thing Yuri remembered thinking was how odd it was to look into his own face through the television screen. Hair slicked back, brown eyes not obscured by his familiar blue frames, the hint of a smirk tugging at his lips that looked far more confident that Yuri had intended it to be at the time…

He was vaguely aware of the triplets running around the room screaming their heads off. Of his father leaping up from his armchair and clapping. Mari laughing so hard she was bent over double clutching her stomach. His mother wrapping her in his arms and rocking him back and forth as she repeated over and over again that she knew it would be him all along. Somewhere in the house a phone started ringing.

There was no going back now.

Yuri had been Selected.
Arrival

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for the amazing response! Onto chapter 2. Will we get to see Victor this time? Only time will tell!

Warning: Brief description of a panic attack at the end of this chapter.

Chapter Two - Arrival

“Yes, I am very sure that my favorite color is blue.” Yuri struggled to keep himself from rolling his eyes. “Why would I want to lie about something like that?”

The woman on the other side of the table frowned and tapped her pencil against the edge of her clipboard. Her blue eyes were starting at him from across the table, as though daring him to try and lie to her now that they were face to face. She was young looking and her bright, red hair was cropped short and curled around her face. She had arrived earlier that morning in order to go over more instructions Yuri would need before he left for the capital in two days’ time. He was pretty sure she had introduced herself as Mila, but the triplets had been bouncing off the walls when she had turned up on their doorstep and it had been difficult to pay attention to the introductions.

“You’d be surprised at what people would lie about if they thought it gave them an edge over the competition.” Mila clicked her tongue against her teeth and scribbled something down. “You didn’t have glasses in your photograph. Do you wear them often, or do you use contacts?”

“I-I wear them most of the time.” Yuri cursed mentally for his stutter. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I do have some contacts, but I don’t like to wear them often. They tend to dry out my eyes. I prefer the glasses.”

Mila’s eyes narrowed and he could see her lips twitch downwards. “But you do have them. Can you order more?”

“I don’t see why not.” Yuri supposed he should have seen this coming. Being whatever someone told him to be wasn’t a new experience for him. He was a dancer. He’d learned a long time ago to put aside the person he really was in favor of the character they needed him to be. “It might take a few days for them to process the order. I think I have enough to tide me over until then.”
“Before I leave, give me the contact information for your optometrist. I’ll place the order and have them delivered directly to the palace.” More scribbling. Mila’s brow was furrowed now, the woman deep in concentration. “And the brace…?”

Yuri swallowed and forced himself to breathe normally. “I was just cleared last week to start spending extended periods of time out of it. I’d need to wear it if I were to do any strenuous activities, but simply walking around should be fine. I’ll make sure not to wear it when I leave.”

“Good.” For the first time, it looked as though he’d said something right. Her demeanor brightened a bit, at least. “You can bring whatever you would like to the palace. The guards will have to go through your bags prior to letting you on the train from here to the airport. Common procedure, I assure you.”

“I understand.” Yuri nodded. “Throw off any would-be assassins, right?”

“Right.” Mila agreed, her smile widening at Yuri’s sudden show of humor. He felt some of the tension he’d been holding between his shoulder blades ease. He could do this. It was just another kind of performance. Once he knew his role he’d been fine. “Moving on… There are some other business items to attend to.”

Mila pulled a sheaf of papers from her clipboard and held it out to him. Yuri took it hesitantly, trying to stop his hands from shaking. He could do this. He’d be fine.

If she saw the tremors in his fingers, Mila didn’t mention it.

“What’s this?” Yuri adjusted where his glasses had slipped down the bridge of his nose and peered down at the thick stack in his hands. “A contract?”

“Yes. Now that you have been Selected, there are some things that are going to change for you.” Mila explained patiently and Yuri placed the contact back on the table in an effort to give her his full attention. “We have found through trial and error, that those who are Selected have some difficulties assimilating back into their old lives once their time at the palace has ended. Particularly for those who were lower than a Three prior to this. To combat that, from this point forward, you will be a Three. Your family will remain as they are, but any family you choose to start if you are dismissed will keep your new caste.”
Yuri tried to school his expression into something that resembled neutral, but on the inside he was screaming. As a Three he could go back to the National Ballet once Prince Victor inevitably let him go. He could do what he’d wanted from the beginning, be an instructor or choreographer. Hell, as a Three he could be the Director one day if he played his cards right. That thought caused tingles to rushes across his nerves.

“While you are at the palace, your family will receive a generous stipend weekly to make up for your absence. These payments will stop if you are dismissed.” Mila was forging on through her explanation, but he could see that her blue eyes were warm now. Her expression less guarded. It was as though she had given him some kind of test and, now that he’d passed, she was ready to relax. “It’s all explained in that contract.”

“Thank you.” Yuri grinned, allowing some of the excitement he was feeling bleed to the surface. It was the first time since finding out he’d been Selected he’d felt anything close to happy. Most of his days were spent under the cloud of a bundle of nerves. “Could I have some time to read this over before I sign? I just… I would like to know exactly what I am getting myself into, if I may?”

“Of course.” Mila nodded her head, but Yuri could sense she still had more to say. He waited. Finally, she let out a small huff of air through her nose and her smile took on a sardonic bent. “There is one more question I have to ask… I do apologize, but I am going to need an honest answer as well.”

"Go ahead." Yuri shrugged. "I really don't have anything to hide."

“Are you a virgin?”

Yuri’s face felt like it was on fire. He knew he made a fantastic picture with his mouth hanging open, eyes wide, and face the color of a ripe tomato. He couldn’t help it. He groaned and buried his face in his arms on the table, no longer able to meet Mila’s intent gaze.

He could hear her chuckle even over his embarrassment. “I take that as a ‘yes’.”

Yuri nodded, his forehead rubbing against the skin of his forearm. It hadn’t been for lack of trying. There had been some kisses with others, and one memorable time in the costume closet with an older dancer that had ended up with his shirt off, but their tryst interrupted by the early return of the costume director before anyone could dive below the belt. It had just been difficult to get to that point emotionally with someone when Yuri’s entire waking life was wrapped up in rehearsals, performances, and social engagements.
“I am so sorry, but I need you to actually verbalize it.” Yuri managed to squeak out a weak ‘yes’ into the crook of his elbow. Somewhere across the table he heard Mila hum in sympathy. “Not that we really have a way to officially check with males, but I am legally obligated to let you know that if you have lied to me and you sign that contract you could be found guilty of treason, jailed, and most certainly immediately dropped down to an Eight if any transgressions were to come to light. Also, once you sign that document, you no longer belong to yourself. You become the property of Illéa. While you are in the palace to court the Crown Prince, he alone shall have your affections. If you are caught romantically involved with anyone else… Well, you get the picture.”

“Treason. Jail. Eight.” Yuri raises his head back up, Mila’s words causing a cold jolt to pass down his spine. He somehow got the feeling that Crown Prince Victor wouldn’t be held to those same standards and that it would probably be frowned upon to deny him anything he might ask for. “I get the picture.”

“You can still back out.” Mila’s face was softer now. Yuri didn’t know if her pity made him feel better or worse.

“Can I?” He knew he shouldn’t be so flippant. This woman was here as a representative of the royal family. She could go back to them and say whatever she wanted about Yuri and he wouldn’t have any cause for rebuttal.

“Not really.” Mila admitted.

Yuri had figured that would be the case. Not that he was intending on giving up now. If only for the money that was being promised to his family and the lure of the change in station. He didn’t have to like Prince Victor. He just needed to hang in there long enough for his family to receive a sizable nest egg and then he could go back to the world he’d left.

Although if he did like the prince… No, that was not a good path to go down. Yuri’s feelings didn’t matter at all. He had to keep reminding himself of that.

“Of course, if Crown Prince Victor does choose you to be his Royal Consort, you and your family will be elevated to the rank of One and well… You’ll be married.” Mila smiled brightly and Yuri returned it with a half-hearted echo. “I’ll step away and give you some time to go over the paperwork. I need to touch base with the tailor you met with the other day. Most of your new wardrobe will be waiting for you once you arrive at the palace, but there will be an assistant that will accompany you to the train station where we will film your farewell. He or she will bring you what you are to wear that day.”
Mila scooped up her clipboard and strode off with solid, confident steps. Yuri wait until she had cleared the room before he turned back to the contract sitting in front of him.

If Prince Victor chose him… Yuri couldn’t help but notice Mila hadn’t said what would happen if Yuri didn’t choose Victor in return. That, he guessed, was not an option.

Not that any of that would matter. He was still mostly convinced the prince would take one look at him and send him packing. Even if Yuri survived the first cuts, it shouldn’t be too long after that before he was packing his things. Yuri would never be able to keep up the façade of someone interesting, of someone who could catch and keep the attention of Victor Nikiforov for very long.

Yuri tapped the end of his pen against the papers. He could refuse. Somehow. Mila was distracted. He could just… Run? But where would he go? Just a few weeks ago he had been sitting on the curb with no idea how his future was going to play out. Now… Well, at least now he had a direction, even if that direction wasn’t something that was going to end like some kind of fairytale.

Before he could let his anxiety change his mind, he flipped to the last page and signed his name.

Whatever the palace held for him, he would have to figure it out as it came.

It wasn’t like he had any other choice.

~

Somehow, Yuri had completely forgotten that there was more than just showing up and trying to seduce the prince to this whole affair. Standing on a raised platform in front of the train station staring out into a blurry sea of strange faces, he was struck with a sudden epiphany.

This was going to be televised.

As in, the whole country was going to get to watch him fall flat on his face. People he had never met before, in provinces he had never been to, were going to have a front row seat in watching him crash and burn. For all he knew, they might even like it. If he went home then that gave a higher chance of their own Selected taking the grand prize, after all.
The burn behind his eyes had nothing to do with his contacts for once.

He was barely holding it together. If it weren’t for the fact that his family was right up there on the stage with him, looking completely unconcerned in the face of the crowds and the cameras in their faces, Yuri was sure he would have lost it.

“Smile, brother.” Mari was standing behind his left shoulder, smile frozen on her face as she waved and whispered into his ear, “You are a performer, yes? Act like it. Perform.”

Right. Perform. This was just another performance. He could do this.

Yuri forced himself to straighten. Years of training in the proper way to hold himself kicked in and he felt his core lift, his chin tilt upwards, and his weight shift so that it was evenly distributed down both of his legs. He plastered a smile to his face and even managed a small wave as the mayor their province stepped up to a podium and called for the crowd’s attention.

He found that he couldn’t concentrate on the mayor’s words, not if he wanted to keep some semblance of sanity. Instead, he looked out into the crowd in the hopes of seeing a familiar face.

It didn’t take long for him to find Yuko in the crowd. At her side was Takeshi, arms wrapped around her shoulder as they stared up at the stage. Yuri paused. They weren’t looking at him. He glanced down towards where the triplets were standing just above knee height right in front of them. They were wearing their nicest dresses, hair brushed and pulled back into shiny ponytails with their signature color coordinated bows. They were beaming from ear to ear, clearly soaking up the attention.

Yuri’s heart stuttered.

Perhaps there could be another reason for him to go through with this. There was no guarantee anyone of import would listen to him or even care what he had to say, but if they did… If he could somehow get the ear of the prince and give him a look into life for the lower castes… Well, it would make him feel less guilty about the stipend and the generous boost in his own social standing, at least.

Far too soon, the mayor’s speech was done and he found himself the center of attention again. A microphone was shoved in his face and Yuri bit down the sudden wave of panic that came with it.
Public speaking was yet another thing he hadn’t quite thought about, but his surprise at being asked to make a short statement allowed him to step forward with confidence for a brief minute before the anxiety could catch up to what was happening and swallow him whole.

“Is there anything that you would like to say before you leave, Mr. Katsuki?” The mayor’s face was kind and he seemed sincere.

Yuri dropped into a deep bow.

“Thank you for your support. I hope to make our province proud.”

Those gathered burst into raucous applause, even those in finer clothing who had been giving him wary glances ever since he’d turned up, dressed black slacks that had been pressed and a crisp, white shirt with a lily (the flower of their province) pinned to the collar. It had been almost like they knew he was an imposter. Definitely not one of them. Someone just pretending to be a Three.

They were cheering now, though, so Yuri must have either done something right or they just knew better than to be anything more than polite with the cameras so close.

As he straightened back up, he was pulled into his mother’s arms. Even though he could feel his cheeks heat in embarrassment, he returned the embrace instinctively. He could feel tears pricking the corner of his eyes now and he fought valiantly to hold them back. The last thing he wanted was to lose a contact and end up half blind when he had to walk from here to the train with some amount of grace.

Exchanging goodbyes felt weird. He hadn’t really been there long. Barely a month. After five years of being gone, he was turning around and leaving them again. It was like he just kept passing through their lives, dancing out of reach as soon as he’d stepped inside again.

“Promise you’ll write us every day!” Axel demanded as she tugged on the leg of his slacks.

“Axel, I’m sure he will be far too busy to write every day.” Hiroko had released him now and she reached out a hand to pat the young girl on top of her head. “But he will write as often as he can, right Yuri?”

“Definitely.” Even though it had been an adjustment at first, Yuri had found that he was now very
fond of the triplets and he knelt down so that he was eye level with them, ignoring the ache in his bad knee as he did so. “Mom’s right. I don’t think I’ll be able to write every day, but I’ll write often.”

“You’ll tell us everything, won’t you?” Lutz asked, eyes wide and small fingers reaching out to grab his hand. He returned her clumsy squeeze gently. “Every detail.”

“Every detail.” Yuri promised. The girls smiled and launched themselves on him wrapping their arms around his neck the best they could. “I’m going to miss you.”

“We’re going to miss you, too.” Mari tugged gently on the back of Loop’s collar. “Come on now, girls. We wouldn’t want Yuri to miss his train. How would that look if he was late to meet the prince?”

The girls released him and Yuri was able to rise back up to his feet. He gave his parents a hug and grinned as they whispered words of encouragement into his ears so softly there was no way even the massive hanging boom mics would be able to pick up the words. Then he hugged Mari and then it was time to go.

He turned around and waved one last time as he boarded the train, before the mousy brunette woman they had sent to escort him to the capital politely guided him away and into a carriage that had been specially reserved for him. Yuri sank down into one of the plush seats by the window and kept waving until they had pulled away and the countryside was nothing more than a green and brown blur.

Leaving them had hurt more than Yuri had expected it to. After all, he’d left them before and, while that hadn’t been easy either, he didn’t remember it feel quite like a knife twisting around in his gut.

Then again, when he’d left five years ago, he’d known exactly where he was going. He’d had a goal. He was going to pursue his dream to dance on the national stage. Sure, he hadn’t exactly been able anticipate exactly how that was going to go, but he’d had a clear picture.

This time? This time he didn’t have anything. He didn’t even know how long he would be gone.

Yuri turned Mila’s words from right before she’d left over in his mind.

“Now that you have signed the contracts, you are bound to remain at the palace until you have either
been dismissed or the Selection has ended with the Crown Prince making his choice. This could be anywhere from a few days to years, depending upon how long it takes the prince to come to his decision.” Her expression had softened then, standing in the doorway of Yuri’s house with the bright afternoon sun surrounding her like a golden halo. “You can’t ask to go home, and the prince is the only one who has the power to dismiss you. Not even the King or Queen can override Prince Victor’s decisions, though they can give him their opinions and advice if they so choose.”

He nodded then, agreeing once more physically to what he had already put his signature to. Yuri hadn’t thought about it then. Now he knew he probably should have. This could be the last time he saw his family for years, longer if some cruel twist of fate led to him actually becoming the prince’s Royal Consort.

Not that he had any confidence at all that was going to happen.

At least when he’d been with the National Ballet, he’d always had the choice to go home. There had always been a clause in his contract for an emergency exit if he ever needed it. He’d come close a few times, having to talk himself down from the ledge before he jumped back away from it, but he’d never actually bailed.

He hadn’t realized how comforting just having that option had made him feel. Like it was a safety net all its own.

Now that safety net was gone and he no longer had a voice in his own life.

Would the prince care if he said he didn’t want to be there? Would Prince Victor let him go if he did get up the courage to ask? How would it feel when Victor inevitably sent him home?

What would Yuri do if he wanted to stay?

Yuri shook his head to pull himself out of his depressing train of thought. No, there wasn’t any need to think about that right now. All it would do was feed the dark beast of his anxiety. They would be arriving at the airport soon and then he would fly to the capitol, where more cameras and complete strangers were waiting there to judge him.

He would not let himself turn up with eyes rimmed in red from crying.
At the very least, he could do that.

So, he watched the scenery speed by, mind blank and feelings held strangled in his chest.

If he didn’t think at all, he would be okay.

~

Yuri found that he was the first to arrive at the airport where he was to meet three other men so they could all fly out to the capital together. His assistant abandoned him, muttering something about needing to make a few phone calls before they boarded the plane and Yuri had been eager to have her go. Her nervous energy was doing nothing to quell the sour rolling of his own stomach.

He wondered what they would be like. Would they be friendly? Would it matter if they were? After all, this was, in some ways, a competition. Even if Yuri was one hundred percent certain he wouldn’t be a threat, that didn’t mean the others wouldn’t automatically view him as one from the beginning. He was sure the vast majority of the others would be more focused. They would have a goal where Yuri did not.

He didn’t have to wait long before a man with tanned skin and dark hair came skipping across the empty terminal. He was also wearing black slacks and a white shirt, the flower in his collar a purple orchid. Yuri was already rising to his feet when the other man’s grey eyes scanned the area and fell on him.

Before he knew it, the other man had practically run to his side, grinning from ear to ear and holding out a hand for Yuri to take.

“Hello! I’m Phichit Chulanont, Four, from Kent!” Phichit didn’t wait for Yuri to completely raise his own hand before he grabbed it and began to pump their arms up and down enthusiastically. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Uh… H-Hello.” Yuri stuttered. Out of all the greetings he could have received, this had not been one of them. “Oh, I’m…”

“Yuri Katsuki. From Carolina. A Five. Although I guess we’re both Threes now, huh?” Phichit sounded as though he was reciting from flashcards. He let go of Yuri’s hand and pointed his index
finger to his right temple. “I’ve done my homework. You were a dancer, right?”

“Yes?” Yuri was still trying to get his bearings. Luckily Phichit didn’t seem to need any encouragement to keep going.

“That’s so amazing!” The other man was now bouncing on the balls of his feet. Despite the situation, Yuri found he didn’t mind the other boy at all. He was more than happy to let him fill the cavernous space with words. “It must have been so cool, performing like that. Oh! Did you travel a lot? I’ll bet this isn’t even your first time on an airplane! It’s mine. I’ve never really been too far from home before. Wait! We should take a picture!”

Before Yuri could realize what was happening, Phichit was at his side with an arm thrown around his shoulders. Yuri hadn’t even noticed the black camera in the other man’s hand when he’d approached and he was sure he looked about as surprised as he felt as there was a click and burst of flash before Phichit was bouncing away again.

“They took my phone, but they did let me bring a few cameras… So long as I swore not to try and get any pictures I might develop out of the palace and into the public’s hands.” Phichit pulled the polaroid photo from out of the bottom of the camera and began waving it through the air. “They’re really serious about keeping whatever goes on behind closed door private. Did they take your phone, too?”

“No… I… Well, I don’t have a phone.” Yuri wasn’t sure if that was a bad thing or not, but from the way Phichit clapped his free hand over his mouth and gasped, he was starting to think it was. “I’ve never exactly needed one…”

What he didn’t say was that he never could afford one. The desire to have it had always been juxtaposed against the small balance in his bank account and the fact that he could call whoever he wanted from the phone in the lounge of the dormitory that housed the corps of dancers. He’d never felt like the need outweighed the expense.

“Makes sense.” Phichit’s grin widened again and he continued flapping the photo through the air again.

“It does?” Yuri blinked as he tried to wrap his mind around what was happening. “I mean. Of course, it does.”
By the time the next Selected arrived, they had fallen into easy conversation. Phichit was still saying about fifty words to Yuri’s every ten, but he did have to say it was far more pleasant that Yuri had anticipated.

The next man to arrive was between Yuri and Phichit in height and had dirty blonde hair and blue eye. He introduced himself as Calix from New Haven and he was even quieter than Yuri, although that seemed to be more of a conscious choice to remain distant from the conversation as opposed to Yuri’s natural shyness.

It was the third man that caused the most commotion.

He was roughly fifteen minutes late and had two assistants trailing behind him with a stack of baggage. He was sporting an undercut and the dark strands of his bangs were artfully styled across her forehead. The slacks and white shirt had clearly been tailored to hug his frame tightly enough to leave absolutely nothing to the imagination. Around his neck was a golden chain with a charm that spelled ‘JJ’ on it and his eyes flashed icy blue as he took of his sunglasses and propped them up on the top of his head.

“Ah, you’re here.” He smirked and Yuri felt something akin to anger rising now. He fought to shove that feeling back down. It wouldn’t do to get into a confrontation this early. “Sorry to keep you waiting. I had lot of fans that were very, very sad to see me go. I would say you know how it goes, but... Well, clearly you do not.”

Without another word, he gracefully slunk past them and toward where an attendant was waiting for them at the ramp to board.

“Jean-Jacques Leroy, Two. He’s from Fellers and he’s supposedly a fairly popular model. Goes by ‘JJ’.” Phichit whispered in Yuri’s ear and that gathered their one bag each and followed. “Hopefully the prince had enough common sense to see through vanity.”

Yuri nodded, but his throat was suddenly too dry to find any words.

So far, they were all so different. Quiet Calix. Bubbly Phichit. Confident and sexy JJ.

And then there was Yuri.
Plain and simple Yuri.

He didn’t have to know what the prince would like to know it definitely wouldn’t be him.

And if that hurt even just a little, he tried not to let it show.

~

Yuri was feeling more dizzy than anything else now. The plane ride had been nice, he’d even managed to sleep for about an hour, his lack of sleep from the night before catching up with him.

It had been after they landed where the calm he’d found as soon as he’d met Phichit fell away.

If he thought the gathering at the train station had been bad, he had no idea what would be waiting for him as they made their way from the airport to the car that would take them to the palace at long last.

There had been some many people crowding the aisle that had been roped off for them. They were all clutching something. Phones, cameras, papers, and signs. Yuri bit his lip as he took in the scene. He wasn’t sure, but he might have even noticed sign with his own name scrawled across them, though, for the life of him, he couldn’t imagine why.

Phichit and Calix were both looking as nervous as Yuri felt, but JJ didn’t hesitate. He tucked his sunglasses so they were hanging from the open ‘V’ of his shirt and strode off with a grin so bright Yuri felt blind just looking at it, and pausing every so often to sign something or do this weird thing where he hooked his fingers into matching ‘J’s’.

Yuri and Phichit exchanged brief glances before Phichit shrugged and hurried off to do the same.

Even though he still couldn’t understand why anyone would want his signature, or even to speak with him, Yuri took his time making his way down the line. He signed notebooks and signs. He allowed little girls and boys to take pictures with him. He shook hands and listened intently as a group of teenage girls giggled and took turn wishing him luck. He smiled and waved and tried to push down any trembles of self-doubt.
Mari was right. This was just another performance. None of these people knew or cared who he really was. They were here to see the show, and he gave them him full attention, to the point where his assistant, looking as harried as ever, grabbed his arm and pulled him away, muttering something about needing to be out of the way before the next group of Selected came through.

From that moment on, there wasn’t a second to rest.

The moment they had arrived at the palace they had been informed they were not going to meet the prince until the next day. First, they had to go through a make-over process, after they took more pictures that was. Apparently, the country wanted to know what they looked like before the royal stylists got ahold of them.

Yuri was not used to being poked and prodded by strangers, and Phichit had been whisked off to the other side of the room as soon as they’d arrived so Yuri found himself without even that to keep him grounded.

They sprayed him with cologne. They trimmed and buffed his nails, applied moisturizer to his skin, and concealer to the bags under his eyes. He stopped them short of letting them line his eyes with a black pencil, though he did notice some of the other men weren’t protesting anything they were thrown. Finally, he handed a garment bag with his name stitched on it and told to go put on the suit within and wait until he was called up to where there was a camera and cream backdrop waiting to do interviews.

He tugged the suit on behind a set of screens and then, since no one had called his name and no one seemed to be looking for him, he made a break for the edges of the room where the hustle and bustle was at a minimum.

Yuri rubbed at his cloth covered arms absently. His entire body itched, every inch of skin that had been showered with attention or slathered with creams and lotions felt as though it was on fire. He bit his bottom lip again, tasting a hint of vanilla from the gloss they had applied there.

Crowds were fine. Yuri was used to crowds. He danced in front of strangers for five years. That was safe. Familiar. There were lines and no one was allowed to cross them.

This was not that.

There was a pillar on the far side of the room, almost cast completely into shadow, and he made his
way there as quickly as he could without drawing any attention to himself. He had to get himself under control. If he didn’t, he would scream the next time someone touched him without warning.

He didn’t know what would happened to him if he did, but he was sure it wasn’t going to be anything good.

He slipped behind the pillar without looking, not thinking there would be anyone there. All the other Selected seemed to be happy to be the center of attention. No one would hide out here.

Yuri was wrong.

“Oi! Aren’t you morons supposed to be doing interviews or something?” Yuri spun around to find a blonde teenager about a head short than he was, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest and blonde bangs falling over piercing green eyes.

Oh, shit.

Yurio Plisetsky. Prince Yurio. Victor’s half-brother and second in line to the throne.

“I-I’m sorry. I just…” Yuri took a deep breath and inclined his head in a sign of respect. Should he bow? No, Yurio didn’t look at all pleased at what he’d offered up so far. Bowing might make it worse. “I just needed a moment. To catch my breath.”

There. That was a good excuse. He was pretty sure the younger boy wouldn’t be able to tell he was five seconds away from a panic attack before bolting.

Yurio raised an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything for a long moment. He glanced back and Yuri started as he saw another dark shape standing off to the side. This man was shorter than Yuri, not even that much taller than the prince, but his expression was stern and his dark eyes cold and Yuri knew without having to ask that this was not a person he would want to mess with.

“Yuri, huh?” Yurio leaned forward and squinted as the weak light from the main room flashed across the name badge that had been pinned on Yuri’s chest. “You’re here to court my idiot of an older brother I suppose.”
“What else would I be doing here?” Any other time, Yuri would have clapped his hands over his mouth and possibly run away entirely. He never had been the best at controlling his words when he was feeling edgy and uncomfortable.

For moment, it looked as though Yurio was about to be offended, but then he wasn’t. Instead he let out a harsh bark of laughter.

“What else would you be doing here indeed.” Yurio smirked. “For what it’s worth, you’d all be better off just going home. Victor isn’t that great of a catch.”

“If he isn’t, I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough.” Really. What had gotten into him? Later he was sure he was going to lose his mind as soon as the numbness and shock of this encounter wore off. Yuri pushed down the blush he could feel beginning to burn on his cheeks. “I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

“Hmmm.” Yurio was looking at him in a strange way now. Almost as though he were trying to appraise Yuri’s worth right there on the spot. Yuri felt his spine stiffen and his shoulders straighten subconsciously under the intense scrutiny. “Enjoy hiding in the corner all you like. I’m done here. Come on, Beka.”

The somber man nodded and without another word they both walked off, leaving Yuri alone, heart beating loudly in his chest.

Well that had been… Something?

Before Yuri had the chance to process what had just happened he heard someone frantically calling his name.

There was no time to think about anything after that.

~

Dinner passed in another haze. We watched the footage of our departures from our hometowns and our arrivals here while we ate. Just the thought of the entire country seeing him kneeling on a raised platform, hugging the triplets close being broadcast nationwide turned his stomach and made it hard for him to enjoy anything on his plate. That had been a private moment, or should have been.
It didn’t help to see the footage from their arrivals either. Yuri refused to listen as the Hisashi Morooka’s voice was interposed over the images of the men gathered in the room walking through the crowds. The less he heard the better. He was hanging on by a thread as it was.

He could hear whispers behind him, too. Those were harder to block out.

“Who does he think he is?”

“He was actually talking to them on the way in. What is he trying to prove?”

“Do you think he thinks if he gets the people on his side Prince Victor won’t have any choice but to choose him?”

Dinner couldn’t end soon enough.

There were some nicer men there. Phichit sat at his side and kept up a steady stream of words which helped to drown out the vicious gossip around them, and there was another man, tall and with a beard that had been neatly trimmed, name Emil Nekola that kept them company as well. He was a Three and had been preparing to become a teacher before he’d been Selected and his calming presence soothed the last bit of nerves even Phichit couldn’t dispel.

After their plates were cleared, they were all shuffled back to their rooms. Yuri’s was at the end of the hall, tucked away almost as though he had been an afterthought. Well, for the first time in his entire life, Yuri didn’t mind being an afterthought. Anything to keep him out of the commotion of people coming and going down the main hall.

He had an attendant. He had met her before dinner. She seemed nice enough. Kind even. She was older, maybe around his mother’s age, though she definitely looked far younger than she probably actually was. Her name was Minako.

“I do apologize for the inconvenience, but we are short staffed at the moment with thirty-four new guests.” Minako had lain out a set of pajamas that were sky blue and clearly made of silk by the time he returned. “Most of the other Selected requested specifically to have at least two attendants, some even three. Since you didn’t indicate a preference, they stuck you with only me. Although, I’m sure a few others will free up as Prince Victor starts to send suitors home.”
“Oh.” Yuri was stuck in the middle of the room, not sure at all what to do with the one attendant he
did have. “Oh, that won’t be necessary. This is fine. I don’t need much.”

Minako smiled, and her smile made him think of home. Of his mother. Of his father and sister and
the triplets and Yuko and all those other people he had just been getting to know again that were
now gone.

“I’ll let the Head Attendant know.” Minako didn’t protest or try to convince him to change his mind.
She simply shrugged and moved towards the bed. “Would you like my assistance dressing for bed?”

Yuri’s face burned. “No! I mean… It’s fine. I can do it myself… Actually… I did bring some of my
own things. Is it… It is okay if I wear something else instead?”

“No problem at all. So long as you stay in your room no one will care what you’re wearing.”
Another shrug and Minako gathered up the silk pajamas from off the bed and folded them away in a
drawer. “I took the liberty of unpacking your things while you were at dinner. They all fit in the top
drawer on the left.”

“Thank you.” Yuri didn’t know how he felt about that either, but Minako was kind. He was sure she
hadn’t snooped, and she’d just been doing her job. “I can take it from here, I think.”

“Ring for me if you need anything. Other than that, I’ll see you in the morning!” Minako twirled
around and gracefully strode out of the room without another word.

For the first time since that morning Yuri was completely and utterly alone.

He went through the motions of getting ready for bed. He dug out a pair of grey sweatpants from the
drawer Minako had pointed out to him and tugged on a ratty t-shirt with a stretched collar and a
fraying hem. Maybe he could bring himself to wearing the fancy sleepwear some other night. Right
now, he wanted the comfort of his own clothing. Clothing that had been with him for years and felt
more like a second skin that cotton and wool.

Yuri brushed his teeth in the en-suite bathroom. Washed his face with soap that smelled like
lavender. Ran wet finger through his hair to get rid of any last traces of gel. He took out his contacts
and put his glasses back on.
The face in the mirror finally looked less like Mr. Yuri Katsuki of the Selected and more like plain Yuri again.

There was a hollow feeling that had settled in just below his ribcage and it ached now that Yuri didn’t have anything to distract him. All the words from before came rushing back like poison in his veins. The way the other men had looked at him when they thought his back was turned. The way JJ had dismissed him in the airport.

This was a mistake.

As soon as that thought crossed his mind, everything stuttered to a stop. It took root, right on top of his heart, wrapping out his lungs until he felt like every breath was tinged with ice. His body was too hot. It felt like it was being burnt to a crisp while his nerves were freezing cold. He could feel every single beat of his heart.

The walls were closing in. Yuri looked out the window, but he was on the second floor. Even if his fumbling fingers would cooperate long enough to disengage the locks, he wouldn’t be able to do more than lean his upper half outside. No, he needed more than that.

He needed out.

Yuri didn’t think, then. Couldn’t have spared a second to do so even if he wanted to. Every instinct screamed that he needed to be out of there. Out in the garden. Out in the middle of the night where no one was talking and no one could see.

So he ran.

Yuri always had a good sense of direction. They had toured the ground floor briefly, but he remembered enough to find his way to where he knew would be a pair of plate glass doors that would lead out into the walled into garden behind the palace. Earlier in the day they had been thrown wide open, allowing fresh air and sunlight to stream into the parlor.

Now, they were closed and blocked by a pair of guards.
“Hey! What are you doing down here?” One of the guards took a step forward, but Yuri didn’t care. He couldn’t care about anything other than the driving need to be gone from here as soon as he could. The get out of these walls before they collapsed and buried him alive in the rubble.

He tried to dodge around the man, but he was stopped by the other guard.

“I’m sorry, sir, but you can’t go out there at night. The grounds are locked down now until sunrise.” Even though this guard was less gruff than his companion, his touch ignited the buzz that had been living just below the surface of his skin and Yuri began to twist and turn in his grasp, trying to pull free.

Dimly he was aware that he was crying.

“What’s going on here?”

Another voice. Another stranger. Yuri tried to twist away again, but this latest move caused a burst of pain in his knee and fell back, almost collapsing in the guard’s arms. This gave him a better view of the newcomer and if he had been able to breathe properly before, he wouldn’t have been able to now.

Crown Prince Victor Nikiforov was standing in the doorway, silver hair soft in the golden light from the lamps in the room. His brow was furrowed in confusion and his blue eyes surveyed the scene in a guarded fashion. Not a hint of emotion showed in them.

“I think he’s trying to get outside, Your Highness.”

“Then let him.”

“But…”

“Did that sound like a question?” Yuri shivered as Victor’s voice dropped down an octave. He screwed his eyes shut and tried to pull away again. This time the guard let him go.

Nothing blocking him from his goal now, Yuri bolted out into the night air. He didn’t care where he
was going. Didn’t care he was barefoot or that he had just caused a scene in front of the very person he was supposed to be trying to impress. Right then he couldn’t care about anything other than making it to the small copse of willow trees he’d seen from his bedroom window.

Once there, he collapsed, breaths coming in sharp pants and a hand clutched in the loose material of his shirt so hard the knuckles were turning white.

Yuri didn’t even realize he’d been followed until a long shadow fell over him. Confused, he looked up only to find Victor staring down at him, expression still frustratingly blank.

Well, shit.
Arrangement

Chapter Notes

Oh, wow! Thank you so much for the overwhelmingly fantastic response so far!

There are going to be a few original characters here and there since there aren't exactly thirty-four male characters in the actual anime that could be eligible potential suitors for Victor. None of them will really have much bearing on the story though. Just kind of in the background. :)

Hope you all enjoy!

Chapter 3 – Arrangement

“Are you alright?”

Yuri forced himself to tear his eyes away from the prince’s piercing gaze. The fingers of the hand not clutching his chest dug into the cool, damp earth underneath him. Focusing on a drop of dew hanging precariously from the tip of a blade of grass helped center him enough that he could at least find his grasp on language.

“Do I look like I’m alright?” Yuri couldn’t even be bothered to freak out about being rude. Right then the only thing that mattered was continuing to breathe in and out.

Vaguely, he was aware of the prince kneeling down next to him. Yuri flinched away, anticipating some kind of touch, but, despite his closeness, the prince didn’t reach out.

“No, I don’t suppose you do.” There was something in Victor’s tone of voice that struck Yuri hard enough to knock him out of his panic for a moment.

The prince almost sounded concerned.

“I’ll be fine.” Yuri took a deep breath and turned his head, looking at where Victor’s pale face was staring at him from a respectful distance away. Some of the dread that had been building at his core siphoned away. Victor didn’t look angry or upset. If anything, he looked scared and confused, kneeling in the dirt in a pair of brown trousers, shirt sleeves rolled up to expose the strong muscles in
his forearms. It was as far from his usual cool and collected image as could be, and somehow it soothed Yuri to see the other man like this instead of causing his anxiety to spark even further. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I am worried, though.” Victor inched forward and Yuri forced himself to stay put instead of jerking away again. He’d already done enough damage. He could still try to save a little of his dignity. “I don’t like seeing people cry, especially when I don’t know the cause.”

“Oh.” Yuri forced the fingers clutching his own shirt to release their death grip on the fabric and he touched his fingertips to his cheek. His skin was hot to the touch and he felt the sticky remnants of his tears there. “Well, I’m not crying now so… Crisis averted?”

“I’d feel better if I knew you had someone to keep an eye on you in case you need any assistance.” Victor inched forward again. It was now impossible for Yuri to focus on anything other than his handsome face at this distance. “If you want me to leave, please at least allow one of the guards to stand close by.”

“I… I don’t think…” Out of all the things he’d been expecting from the prince, this had not been one of them. Of course, when he had imagined their first meeting, he hadn’t been picturing being couched down on the ground in his pajamas. Maybe it was the complete and utter ridiculousness of the situation that caused him to be able to stay marginally calm. Or maybe it was because he’d already gotten every last ounce of panic out already. Yuri was feeling strangely empty at the moment. “If you want to stay, that’s fine.”

It wasn’t like Victor even had to listen to him even if Yuri had insisted he go. Why he would want to stay, Yuri couldn’t begin to fathom. Especially not when Yuri was sure that he was about to be politely dismissed soon enough.

Which brought up another matter…

Yuri cleared his throat and Victor tilted his head to the side in a show that he was paying attention.

“If you don’t mind, could you please not mention this episode when you send me home tomorrow?”

“Send you home? Why on earth would you assume I would want to send you home?” For what it was worth, Victor really and truly sounded confused. Maybe even a little hurt.
No, that couldn’t be right. Yuri must have been hearing things. Letting his stress get the best of him and hoping to hear things where there was nothing.

“Um… Why wouldn’t you? Just look at me.” Yuri rocked back onto his ass and frowned as Victor moved to mirror his position, crossing those impossibly long legs underneath him and placing his pale hands on his knees as he continued to scrutinize Yuri. Even though Victor could clearly see the state he was in, Yuri waved his hands over his body anyways, gesturing to the muddy sweats, the baggy shirt and where he knew his face had to be red and blotchy from crying. “I’m pathetic. I couldn’t even keep it together for twenty-four hours.”

“I’m not sending you anywhere just because you had a panic attack after your entire life was uprooted. I’m assuming that is what this was?” Yuri nodded solemnly and for the first time that evening, he could see Victor’s lips twitch at the corners almost like he wanted to smile. The prince continued. “What kind of person do you think I am?”

“I don’t know.” Yuri shrugged. “I don’t know the first thing about you, really.”

“I’m sure you know plenty about me.” Victor tapped the index finger of his right hand against his chin. “Most of my life is public record, after all.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. Anyone can put forth a picture perfect image when it’s required.” Yuri felt himself relaxing as he spoke, even though there was a loud voice shouting at the back of his brain that he was an idiot and ruining everything and that he was probably only a few more ill-advised sentences away from being charged with treason. What was that expression? In for a penny, in for a pound? He’d already stuck his foot in his mouth, and Victor had yet to run away screaming, so Yuri couldn’t see how this situation could get any worse. “That’s how this is supposed to work, right? We don’t really know you, you definitely don’t know us. For all you’re aware, this could be how I am all the time. You might be doing both of us a favor by sending me away.”

“Will you agree to let me be the judge of that?” Victor asked, and Yuri couldn’t help but think the other man was sincere. At least, he seemed sincere enough that Yuri nodded in acquiescence. “You are right about one thing, though. I don’t know you. I mean, I’ve seen your picture, I’m sure, but I’m having a really difficult time putting a name to your face… I don’t recall any of the chosen applicants having glasses…”

“Oh… Oh!” Yuri reached up with both hands and grabbed the arms of his glasses, pulling the frames off his face. “Sorry. I… Um… I didn’t exactly think to put in contacts before freaking out. Sorry. I’m Yuri, by the way. Yuri Katsuki. From Carolina.”
“Nice to meet you, Yuri.” Victor smirked. “Although, I am going to have to ask that the next time we meet we act as though it is the first time. Wouldn’t want anyone thinking you were trying to cheat or something like that.”

“You mean crying on your shoulder in the dirt in the middle of the night isn’t me trying to cheat? Darn, I was afraid I wasn’t doing this right.” Yuri felt his mood perk up a bit as Victor chuckled at that. In the dark, it was so easy to see Victor as nothing more than another human being. Real and prone to making his own mistakes, though Yuri had no idea what those mistakes even could be. “I-I won’t say a word. I promise.”

“Good.” Victor got to his feet, brushing off the back of his pants as he stood. “I think it would be best if I returned now before someone comes to find me. The guards are only a shout away if you need them. Please, try not to stay out too long. Even though it is spring, the weather can get chilly at night and you aren’t exactly dressed for it.”

Yuri felt his face heat, and he thanked whatever deities might be listening that it was probably too dark out here even with the moonlight for Victor to see his blush. The strange confidence and clarity that had fallen over him once he’d cried all the tensions of the day out was slipping away now. If Victor noticed how he was starting to tremble again, he didn’t say anything, just offered up another one of those frustratingly vague smiles he was so well known for and turned to leave.

Yuri watched him go as complete and utter disbelief wormed its way into his system. Oh, god. Had he really just done that? Had he really said those things to the Crown Prince? Despite Victor’s reassurance that he wasn’t about to be sent packing, Yuri buried his face in his hands, forgetting that he was still holding his glasses and almost poking himself in the eye with the corner of his frames.

Would the prince still think the same way about sending him home in the morning?

Unfortunately, it seemed like there was nothing Yuri could do but wait and find out.

~

The next morning Yuri almost couldn’t get out of bed.

His entire body ached and his right knee felt like it was on fire. Somewhere over his head her heard Minako let out a terse sigh as she reached out and shook his shoulder again, none too gently. Yuri let out a groan and rolled away so that his back was now facing his attendant. This meant he now had
the morning sunlight searing through his closed eyelids, but that was remedied easily enough by
drawing the fluffy comforter over his head.

“Five more minutes.”

“No more minutes.” Minako’s tone was firm and Yuri squawked and tumbled to the floor with a
yelp and a grunt as Minako ripped the covers off of him. “Are you trying to get sent home or
something? Get off the floor, and get your skinny butt in the bathroom. It’s not just your head on the
chopping block if you’re late for breakfast.”

As much as Yuri hated to admit it, Minako was right. He was not going to be the only punished if
anyone thought she hadn’t done her job properly. That alone pulled him out of his own head enough
to stumble to his feet, almost collapsing as his full weight hit his injured knee and it buckled under
the strain. Yuri would have gone down again, too, if it hadn’t been for Minako grabbing him at the
last second and slipping her shoulder under his own arm and hoisting him back up.

“What did you do last night?” Yuri hoped she didn’t actually expect an answer to that question. He
was pretty sure telling her that he’d had a panic attack, run out into the night barefoot and frantic,
probably insulted the prince in their subsequent conversation, and then had another panic attack after
he left wouldn’t end well. She didn’t seem to want a response anyway, as she drug his limping form
into the bathroom, depositing him on the closed lid of the toilet while she turned around and began
drawing a bath. “Right, you’ve got a knee injury. Mila told me about it. A warm bath should help
and I’ll run down to the kitchen to get some ice. I suppose there’s nothing else for it, we’ll have to
find some baggier slacks so you can wear your brace underneath it.”

“Thank you.” Yuri cleared his throat against the scratchiness there and he hoped Minako would
think the hint of gravel in his voice was from sleep and not from crying until his whole body had felt
raw. “You don’t have to…”

“Yes, I do. Not to mention I want to. You’re clearly in pain and I’m not heartless.” Minako dipped a
finger in the waster as though to test the temperature, humming under her breath as she grabbed a
white package from the counter and poured what looking to be bright green crystals into the water.
Yuri caught a hint of a mint aroma as they dispersed into the warm water. “Eucalyptus. It’ll help. Did
they prescribe you any painkillers before you left?”

“No?” Yuri struggled to keep up with Minako’s fast pace. “I mean, no. I didn’t even ask. I didn’t
think I’d need them.”

“Of course, you didn’t.” Minako shut off the taps with a flick of her wrist and turned around to face
where Yuri was now hunched in on himself, as though he could hide from his disappointment if he tried to make himself small enough. “Okay. Here’s the plan. You are going to soak here until I get back. Then, you are going to take the pain medication I get for you and we are going to spend some time alternating ice and heat on that knee until it’s time to go. You do at least have a heating pad, right?”

“You know I do.” Yuri grumbled. “You unpacked all my things.”

Minako grinned and nodded. “I’ll be back. Soak. Keep that right leg in the water the whole time. I’ll be back.”

As soon as the door clicked closed behind her, Yuri bullied his aching muscles into motion, using the towel bar as support as he divested himself of his sweats and shirt. He cringed as he examined the dried mud on the knees of his pants. Well, at least Minako hadn’t mentioned anything about that. He never had been a good liar even if he could have thought up some excuse as to how his pants had gotten that way.

Yuri sank down into the hot water with a loud groan and a hiss of pain as the inflamed muscles and tendons in his right knee slid beneath the waterline. The eucalyptus caused his skin to tingle pleasantly and he felt the tension he’d been carrying in his back and shoulders melt away.

His mind whirred and he tried to think of what he was going to do now. In the cold light of day, it was plain to see he hadn’t handled his interaction with the prince well at all the night before. Even if Yuri was now more convinced than ever that this was a mistake, he still felt the strong urge to at least get a chance to apologize. Maybe even beg for forgiveness before Prince Victor dismissed him. The prince deserved at least that much for how accommodating he’d been.

Yes, that was a good plan. Apologize to the prince. Let him know there were no hard feelings with his decision to send Yuri home. Yuri was sure it was pretty obvious to the both of them now that he was not Royal Consort material. He’d just be an embarrassment to the whole country. Then Victor would have one less person to worry about and he could move onto someone who was a little more put together.

And if the thought of never getting to see Victor’s blue eyes in the moonlight again caused his heart to ache, he ignored it.

This was for the best.
While Yuri alternated heat and cold on his knee in ten minute intervals, Minako hurried around the room trying to get the rest of him ready to go. At first it had been strange sitting there in only his black boxer briefs while a woman he barely knew went through his closet, but Yuri had gotten over that part quickly enough. He’d been through plenty of costume fittings. All he had to do was pretend this was just another one of those and he’d been fine.

It helped that he was really starting to like Minako, too.

She picked out an outfit and laid it out on the bed. She brushed his hair and back applied enough gel to keep it soft, but also prevent it from falling down into his face during the course of the day. She held up a mirror for him so that he could put his contacts in without having to limp back into the bathroom. More concealer under his eyes, a dusting of some kind of powder over his cheeks and across the bridge of his nose. A smidge of mascara on his eyelashes and gloss on his lips once more. A light blue button up and another pair of dark slacks, these a dark grey close to slate. A black belt to go with it all.

His brace was fit snugly over his knee and only caused the smallest of bulges in the material around his knees. Yuri moved into the bathroom and took a look at himself in the mirror. He looked normal enough. Maybe a bit on the pale side, and Minako hadn’t been kidding when she said he was skinny. Usually when he was stressed, he ate his feelings, but with so many mouths to feed at his parents’ and the uncertainty of when or if he was going to be able to work again he’d taken the opposite approach this time and had barely eaten at all.

At the very least, he could hopefully get a full breakfast before he had to come back up here and pack.

He was one of the last men to arrive in the large ballroom they had been told to meet in. Gone were the racks of clothing and make-up stations. Instead, there were long tables with place settings and no food in sight. Yuri’s stomach grumbled. He’d hadn’t eaten much at dinner and had expended more energy freaking out than his body had to give and he was starving now.

The last to arrive was JJ, making an entrance even when there wasn’t anyone to really impress.

“Ugh, finally.” Phichit had sought him out as soon as Yuri had arrived and the other man rolled his eyes as JJ strode into the room beaming and offering up loud, but not sincere at all, apologies for his lateness. “You think he’s trying to psych us out?”
“He could be.” Sitting across the table from them was a bright and bubbly young man by the name of Leo. He had been a Four just like Phichit and the two had apparently formed a bond after dinner when Yuri had retreated early. “Doesn’t bother me, though.”

“Nope. Not a bit.” Phichit squirmed a bit in his seat and everyone started to settle. “Finally. I’m famished.”

Yuri nodded in agreement, scanning around the room in an effort to discern where the food might come from. He’d assumed they would have eaten in the dining hall they’d been shown the day before, but at this point he wasn’t picky about location so long as food was involved. Maybe with a full stomach he would be able to keep himself from breaking down too much when he threw himself on the prince’s mercy.

On his left side, he noticed Calix shifting around nervously, but the other boy didn’t say much, as he hadn’t before. He held himself well, though, Yuri noted. He made a striking figure, straight backed and eyes soft as they also roamed the room. He looked exactly like what Yuri thought a prince might and with his lighter coloring he wouldn’t look too bad sitting at Victor’s side…

No, stop thinking about that. Yuri pinched his own thigh under the table in an effort to focus.

A man with bushy hair that had been pulled back into a long ponytail coughed to get their attention.

“Good morning, gentlemen!” His voice had a slight accent and Yuri forced himself to focus even harder to make sure he understood what was being said. “As some of you may already know from the interview process, my name is Celestino Cialdini. Before you can go into the dining hall and eat with the Royal Family, we do have to go over some matters of proper etiquette first. If you will all please pay attention, this shouldn’t take too long…”

Yuri let the instructions wash over him. Luckily, he’d been to a few fancier dinners in his time with the ballet so none of this was new information. Both Phichit and Leo were hanging off every word, though. So, with no one to really distract him, he allowed his eye to wander again.

It was because of his distraction that he was one of the first to notice when Prince Victor stepped into the room.

Celestino noticed quickly as well, turning to face the Prince and dropping into a deep bow.
“Your Majesty.” Victor nodded in acknowledgement and the other man straightened. “You’re early.”

“I am. I thought that these wonderful men might be getting a bit hungry. I know I am.” Victor grinned as he looked around the room and there was a smattering of chuckles at his attempt at humor. Was it Yuri’s imagination or did Victor’s gaze linger longer on him than anyone else? No, it definitely had to be his imagination. “Don’t let my presence stop the lesson. I’ll just be over here where I can speak with them each one by one?”

“As you wish, Highness.” Celestino bowed again and Victor returned the gesture before walking over to the table nearest him, bending over slightly to whisper in the ear of the man sitting there. He was tall and with a two-tone haircut, dark underneath and bleach blonde on top. Yuri watched with detached interest as they settled into the two plush armchairs that had been left in the corner of the room. “Alright, back to what we were discussing… Now, with the forks you will want…”

Yuri went back to tuning the instructor out again, more focused on Victor and the man he was talking with. Victor seemed relaxed enough, politely smiling and laughing as the man he was speaking with told some kind of story completely with dramatic hand gestures.

Victor spent about five or so minutes with each man, sending them back one by one to send the next one over to meet him. Yuri felt his heart lurch as Calix went, then Leo, and then finally Phichit. He was next.

When Phichit came back and chirped that the prince would see him now, Yuri felt the blood drain out of his face. He felt like they were encased in lead. Yuri took a deep breath and forced himself to move with only the smallest of limps. He prayed all the way there that Victor would be kind about asking him to leave. That maybe he would let Yuri slip away after breakfast when everyone else would be distracted. If Yuri asked, Victor might even make sure there weren’t any cameras there to document his shame.

Prince Victor was smiling when Yuri took his seat, though his expression dropped a bit as Yuri couldn’t quite hide the wince of discomfort as he tried to favor his right knee going down.

“Are you in pain, darling?”

Yuri felt his eyes widen and his cheek go dark at the use of the endearment. “I-I… I’m fine. I… Darling?”
If he could have, he would have kicked himself. Why did his stupid mouth have to keep doing that thing where it refused to confer with his brain before letting words spill out? It was like his filter didn’t work whenever Victor was around.

“Yes, do you not like it?” Victor asked, head quirked to the side and that same searching look on his features that had been there last night.

“It’s not my name.” Yuri pointed out. God, he was going to kick himself, manners be damned.

“You’re right, it’s not.” Victor tapped a finger against his lip and looked up towards the ceiling. “Alright, Yuri. I don’t mind calling you by your given name. Back to my question, though. Are you in pain?”

“Not too much.” Yuri shrugged. This was not the way he had wanted this conversation to go, but Victor sounded truly concerned. The least he could do was put the other man’s mind at ease. “I tore the tendons in my knee a few months back. I’m still not fully over it… I may have tweaked it some recently.”

Victor’s eyebrows raised in recognition. “I’m sorry to hear that. If there is anything I can do to make your stay here more comfortable, please don’t hesitate to ask. I think we have a doctor on staff, but I can’t look into seeing if we can’t contract a physical therapist to come out here…”

“No!” Yuri blushed again as Victor jumped a bit at his harsh tone. Yuri took a deep breath and tried again. “I mean, you don’t have to do that. I mean… Why would you do that? Aren’t I…?”

“Out of everyone I have met so far, you seem to be the only one that seems convinced I am about to boot you out the door.” Victor sounded more amused than upset, but Yuri couldn’t help but grimace. “I don’t want to send you home, Yuri. Honestly, I promise, but if you don’t want to be here… I must confess, it would upset me to see you leave, but I wouldn’t want to hold you here against your will.”

“I don’t want to go.” That much wasn’t a lie. The last thing he wanted to do was to leave the palace, for a number of reasons. “I just… This was a mistake, I think. I can’t… I can’t be… Well, this.”

Yuri waved a hand over his body, from his slicked back hair to his clothing, to the makeup on his face.
“This isn’t me.” Yuri knew he was being stupid. He also knew that even if the prince seemed content enough to keep him for now, that this needed to be said. Victor had been nothing but kind so far. He deserved to know the truth. To make up his mind when he was in possession of all the facts. “I can put on a good performance when I need to, but I can’t do it all the time. The me from before. Messy hair, glasses, comfy clothes. That’s the real me. Shit, I don’t even like contacts.”

There was a long pause, then. Just long enough that Yuri was considering finding a way to melt into the floor, when Prince Victor finally reacted.

He laughed.

Really laughed. Not the polite half laugh he’d been doing with anyone else. The flutter of butterflies in Yuri’s stomach settled as he heard it, and he felt a grin cracking across his own face in turn. It was the kind of laughter that begged to be returned.

“Oh, god…” Yuri buried his face in his hands. “Why do I keep doing this?”

“Don’t let me stop you.” Victor seemed to be getting himself back under control. When he looked back at Yuri there was a twinkle in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. “You’re a breath of fresh air, but I do understand what you’re saying. There are certain expectations, aren’t there?”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m not a good choice.” There. Yuri had said it. Whatever Victor wanted to do with the information he could. “I have to admit I had hoped to stay a bit longer, if only because my family could use the money…”

“How about we make a deal?” Victor asked and Yuri had to admit his curiosity was piqued. He nodded for Victor to continue. “I’ll keep you here for as long as you want to be. In return, please don’t dismiss me out of hand?”

“I… Me? Dismiss you?” Yuri barely stopped his jaw from dropping open.

“Is that not what you’re doing?”

Yuri had to admit Victor had a point. He was dismissing the prince out of hand just because he
thought he wasn’t even good enough to be there. Despite his many, many mistakes, Victor seemed to want him to stay and Yuri definitely wanted to stay in return.

“Fair point.” Yuri agreed. “How about this? Over there are about thirty-three people who desperately want to be your husband. Instead of that, why don’t I just be your friend? You might need one… Not that I meant to insinuate you don’t have any friends…!”

“Deal!” Victor cut him off before he could really get going and Yuri mentally thanked him. “I look forward to getting to know you, Yuri… As a friend.”

“Yes. A friend.” Yuri nodded, already feeling his mood picking up. That hadn’t been so bad. He’d barely made a fool of himself. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Just Victor will be fine. If we are to be friends, what is the point of getting titles caught up in the mix?” Victor winked then, and Yuri felt heat creeping up the back of his neck at the motion, but he valiantly fought back against the butterflies. If he was going to be Victor’s friend, he had to stop letting the other man get to him like that. “You can go back to your table now, if you’d like. Only a few more men to go and we can all eat.”

Yuri’s stomach took the cue to let out a low whine at those words and Yuri couldn’t help but hide his face in the palm of his hand for a moment before nodding weakly, allowing Victor’s deep laughter to follow him back to his chair.

“That looked like it went well.” Phichit immediately nudged Yuri in the ribs as soon as he took his seat again after informing the man at the end of their table, he was pretty sure his name was Kendry, though it was starting to become more and more difficult to keep all the names he already knew straight. He wasn’t sure at all how Victor was going to manage it. “What did you think? He’s obviously gorgeous, but there is more to life than sexy hair, right?”

“I thought he was very polite.” Leo put in from the other side of the table. “He seemed to like the both of you far better than he did me.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Even though Yuri couldn’t exactly say that he had effectively taken himself out of consideration, he still felt the urge to encourage the other man. At the very least, he could maybe help Victor find someone here who truly did deserve the spot at his side. Why couldn’t that person be either Phichit or Leo? “He seemed very interested in whatever the two of you were talking about.”
The conversation went on from there, Phichit driving it as he went back and forth floating all the potential date the prince might take them on. Yuri allowed himself to be distracted. It was better than falling victim to the negative thoughts that always lay just below the surface.

Before long, the last man had met with Victor and they went silent in their seats as the prince rose to his feet for the first time since he’d come in.

“It has been wonderful getting a chance to meet with all of you at long last.” Victor’s voice was clear and didn’t hold any hint of a waver. “I think we’ve all waited long enough to eat. If those of you I have asked to stay behind would please remain seated, the rest of you can go ahead to the dining room.”

Yuri rose to his feet and kept close to Phichit and Leo as they went to leave the room. He noticed Calix had stayed behind and he spared a brief moment to wonder what was happening before the thought of finally getting to eat caused him to let it go.

The rest of the Royal Family was waiting for them as soon as they entered the room and everyone hovered on the threshold as they waited for some sign from the King or Queen as to what to do.

King Yakov looked as somber as he ever did, his sour expression matched only by his wife Queen Lilia. Prince Yurio was there, too, sitting with an empty chair between himself and the queen. He didn’t look happy to be there either, but Yuri actually couldn’t remember a single time when he’d actually seen the teenager look happy to be anywhere. Whereas Victor was always smiles and easy banter in public, Yurio often shied away from the camera and answered any questions in monosyllables if at all.

In fact, their brief encounter behind the pillar the day before had probably been the most amount of words Yuri had ever heard the blonde mutter ever since he’d started showing up to state functions a few years before.

A whisper ran through their littler crowd and they all bowed. Yuri glance up to see the King nod his approval.

“You may all sit.” King Yakov’s voice was loud, projecting throughout the room easily and they all scrambled to take their places, some with more grace than others. Yuri could since Prince Yurio smirk as he hid a bark of laughter behind his hand.
Not that Yuri blamed him. He was sure they made an interesting bunch, almost like watching startled fawns try to navigate over uneven ground.

“We are pleased to have you here.” Queen Lilia spoke next. Her voice was as sharp as her cheekbones, which had been expected. Unlike Victor’s mother and Yurio’s mother before her, this current queen was more harsh lines and no nonsense from what Yuri had been able to gather. Closer in kind to her king in attitude. “I’m sure Crown Prince Victor will join us shortly. He would not want us to wait any longer on his account. We hope you enjoy your meals.”

With a snap of her fingers, servants came out of the woodwork and began serving everyone. Yuri’s mouth watered as a plate piled high with pancakes was placed in front of him. In the back of his mind, he knew that he should be careful. He wasn’t anywhere near active enough right now to be eating like this all the time, but he had lost a lot of weight over the course of his recovery. Besides, even being Victor’s friend still meant that there would come a day when Yuri would have to go home in order to hold the place of someone who would eventually capture the prince’s affections. He might as well enjoy the food now while he had the chance.

Yuri was chewing on a particularly crispy piece of bacon when Prince Victor swept back into the room, holding up a hand to stop everyone from getting to their feet. He made his way to his father’s side, whispering something in his ear as he went and sparing a smile for his stepmother before taking up the empty seat between her and his half-brother. Yurio simply rolled his eyes and grumbled something under his breath that caused the Crown Prince to laugh before he allowed a servant to place a plate of food in front of him.

It took him a full minute to notice that the eight people who they had left behind hadn’t come in with the prince and another minute to put two and two together enough to figure out exactly what that had meant.

They were gone.

The cuts had begun.
Chapter Notes

A massive thank you to everyone who has left a comment or a kudos! I can’t describe how happy I am that everyone seems to like this so far!

A little more world building and a few more familiar faces pop up in this chapter!

Chapter Four – Shifting

Twenty-six.

There were now twenty-six men still left at the palace.

Yuri chewed on his bottom lip as he looked around the room that had been dubbed The Entertaining Room. Apparently, it used to be The Women’s Room, but… Well, there was a bit of a problem with that nomenclature now that Victor was the second Crown Prince to invoke an all-male Selection.

The title of the room aside, it was still crowded, even with eight people gone.

Tucked away in a far corner of the room, Yuri tried to focus on the letter he was writing to his family. The entire morning had been taken up by interviews with the camera people, an interminable period of time where they had all been stuffed into a small room while the stylists met with them one by one in order to make sure there weren’t any last minute updates to their appearance needed, and then lunch had been spent sans the Royal Family, but not sans the entire cotillion of other men.

Being barred from going out into the gardens for the time being as spending time in here with Queen Lilia was apparently mandatory, this was the best Yuri could get to being alone, having waved off Phichit’s offer of joining the card game he was having with Leo, Emil, and another man Yuri thought was named Michele. They weren’t too far away and Yuri knew he could move over to join them as soon as he was able to get his hands to stop shaking.

There was a loud spurt of laughter and Yuri looked up from where he was making a distinct lack of progress in writing his letter to find JJ holding court at the opposite end of the room, right next to
where the Queen was sipping her tea and trying to hold a conversation with a quiet boy with brown hair and eyes and a light smattering of freckles across his nose. Yuri couldn’t help but notice Queen Lilia shoot JJ a cold look from out of the corner of her eye before returning her full attention to the soft-spoken man in front of her.

“He’s an annoying son of a bitch, isn’t he?”

Yuri almost fell out of his seat as Yurio dropped down into the chair across from him. The teenager was scowling, which Yuri was coming to find was more or less his default expression, and he was quick to lean back and prop his feet up on the table, displaying the leopard print hightops he was wearing.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Yuri looked back across the room, noting that there were now a few people sending him curious glances. He bit at his lip again and tried to focus on the half blank page in front of him. “He just… Takes some getting used to?”

“I’m not the one you’re trying to impress.” Yurio was quick to point out. Out of the corner of his eye, Yuri noticed Queen Lilia glaring daggers from across the room until Yurio frowned and removed his feet from the furniture, choosing to slump over the table on his elbows instead. “You don’t have to play some stupid game when I’m around.”

“You could tell Victor if I say anything bad about the others.” Yuri bounced the eraser end of his pencil against the paper. He might as well give up on the letter for now. With Yurio here, any last dregs of his concentration were completely shot. “I would have no way to stop you.”

“Even if I did, the idiot never listens to what I say, or, if he does listen, he won’t remember it down the road.” Yurio brushed his bangs off to one side so that one of his green eyes was showing through the cradle of his arms. “So, are you one of the ones that are after my brother’s heart? Or is it his throne? Some of you don’t seem to be able to separate one from the other.”

“Honestly?” Yuri asked, giving Yurio his full attention now. The teenager grinned, nodding sharply. “I’m not particularly interested in either.”

“Well, that’s just fucking stupid.”

“Probably.” Yuri shrugged. “But it’s true. I definitely don’t want any kind of throne, and I don’t want your brother. At least, not like that.”
“Everyone wants my brother.” The words were said without any true force or venom. It was as though this was something Yurio had long made peace with. “Why should I think you’re any different from the rest of these fuckers? How do I know you aren’t lying through your fucking teeth?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you have a particularly foul mouth for a prince?” Yuri asked, slightly curious to know the answer. So far, every member of the Royal Family he had met and every single guard and staff member was well spoken and courteous to a fault. Yurio? Well, Yurio definitely was neither of those things and no one really seemed to bother with trying to correct his behavior.

“Every day of my damn life.” There was an odd spark of something that flashed through Yurio’s eyes too quickly for Yuri to determine what it was before Yurio was back to staring at him like he was a puzzle the young prince was trying to sort out. “They gave up on trying to get me to behave years ago. Now they just shove me towards the back of the room when I’m required to be somewhere, and exclude me when I’m not. It works for me. Now, stop deflecting. I asked you a question.”

“To answer your question… You don’t.” Oddly enough, talking to Yurio wasn’t making him feel as drained as he had been a few minutes ago. Maybe the younger prince had good timing and Yuri was about out of his downturn anyway before he’d shown up. “I don’t have a way to prove my internal feelings to you.”

Yurio scoffed and pushed up off his elbows, slumping back into this seat and folding his arms over his chest. Yuri felt his shoulders straighten under such an intense glare. He tried desperately not to fidget, but he couldn’t quite keep his left leg from bouncing.

When it looked like Yurio wasn’t going to say anything in favor of staring at him in silence, Yuri took a chance.

“Where is your friend?”

That seemed to get a reaction out of the other boy. Yurio sat up a little straighter, his eyes flicking to the door and back again.

“He’s not my friend. He’s my own personal babysitter.” Yurio growled low in his throat, perhaps in an effort to convince Yuri of his words. “And a guard. Which means he gets busy. Guarding shit. What shit, I don’t know. Something stupid I’ll bet.”
Yuri hummed in agreement. “I’ll bet.”

“Whatever. I’ve been here long enough.” With that he pushed himself to his feet with enough force to send the chair skidding backwards. “Fall in love with my brother or don’t. I don’t care.”

Yuri watched him go, more confused now than he had been before.

What did love have to do with anything?

~

The rest of the day passed by in a blur. Yuri eventually relented in the face of Phichit’s intermittent begging and ended up playing a few rounds of cards with him, finding that he was truly enjoying the company.

Aside from a minor fluff up when JJ and a man named Georgi tried to approach the Queen at the same time, the afternoon passed with little incident. Even that had been brief and immediately cut off by a well-placed scathing comment about decorum from Queen Lilia that had sent both would-be combatants to opposite ends of the room to lick their wounds and regroup.

“Do you think every day is going to be like this?” Phichit was sprawled out across the foot of Yuri’s bed. Even dinner had been uneventful. Both Victor and his father had been caught in some kind of meeting and hadn’t been able to attend. “If it is, how does anyone live here and not go insane?”

“Matter of perspective.” Yuri was sitting at his desk, still trying to figure out what to write in his letter home. There had been so much that had happened over the past two days he simply didn’t know where to begin or even what he could include. He wasn’t naïve enough to think any correspondence was getting out of this place unmolested. “I happen to like quiet days where not much happens.”

“It didn’t seem like you had too quiet of a day.” Leo was curled up at the head of Yuri’s bed since the bottom was taken. Why they were in his room instead of their own, Yuri wasn’t quite sure, but he didn’t mind the intrusion. If he listened hard enough he could hear Minako humming to herself in the bathroom where she was camped out making alterations to some of Yuri’s pants to make sure he had a generous selection that would hide his knee brace if needed. “First, Prince Victor talks to you the longest out of anyone and then Prince Yurio singles you out this afternoon. I don’t think he’s said even a single word to anyone else.”
“No, he has. He told JJ to go fuck himself after dinner.” Phichit rolled over onto his back in order to stare up the ceiling. “I think what Leo means to say is that he hasn’t said a single civil word to anyone else.”

“He’s really not that bad.” Yuri twisted his body in his chair to be able to see the two men behind him. “If everyone else didn’t act so scared of him, then maybe he’d talk to you, too.”

“You aren’t scared of him?” Leo blurted out. As Yuri shook his head, he thought he heard a soft laugh come from the bathroom. “Why not? If he wanted he could tell Prince Victor anything. He could probably have any one of us sent home if he tried hard enough.”

“He could.” Yuri had to admit that Leo had a point there. Yurio very well could make life miserable for anyone he so chose, but Yuri couldn’t quite shake the feeling that the younger boy wouldn’t do something like that. “I don’t think he will. He seems to be more of the type to let you fall flat on your face yourself. It’s probably more entertaining for him that way.”

“Wow. You do have a good idea of what makes my little brother tick.”

They had left the door open earlier, and now standing the doorway was Victor, still dressed in a suit jacket and staring at the three men with clear amusement in his eyes as he tossed his head and moved his silver bangs out of his face. Phichit and Leo bolted to their feet and bowed, Yuri doing the same, though much slower and less frantic.

“No, no. This isn’t a formal occasion. There’s no need for any of that.” As if to stand by his own words, Victor allowed himself to lean over so that he was supporting himself against the doorframe. He crossed his legs at the ankles as well, the picture of casual. “How are the three of you doing this evening?”

“Fine! We’re doing great! Wonderful actually!” Yuri had noticed that Phichit had a tendency to ramble when he was surprised or nervous and this didn’t seem to be the exception to the rule. “How are you? Are you doing well?”

“I’m doing very well, thank you for asking.” Victor responded cheerfully before looking past the two men in front of him and over to where Yuri had taken his seat at the desk again. “As for my brother… Yuri’s right. He’s mostly bark and very little bite. Like a kitten. No need to treat him like he’s made of spun glass. He actually might like you better if you don’t tiptoe whenever he’s near. You also might want to not call him a kitten to his face, too. He doesn’t tend to like that.”
“Oh, uh… Thank you for the tip.” Leo grinned nervously and rubbed at the back of his neck.

“Anytime.” Victor shoved his hands in his pockets and his grin widened. “Sorry for interrupting, but I thought I might catch Yuri before he turned in for the evening.”

“We can go…” Phichit moved as though he was going to do just that when Victor shook his head and popped up off the doorframe.

“No need. This will be quick.” Victor winked and Yuri didn’t even have to see either of his friend’s faces to know that both of them were sporting blushed that could have rivaled his own on a good day. For what it was worth, Yuri didn't blush at all. Huh. That was new. “I wanted to invite you to come for a walk with me through the gardens tomorrow before dinner. Would you be up for it?”

Yuri shrugged. “Sure. I don’t see why not. I can meet you in the hallway by the glass doors at six?”

“Dinner is at seven… Make it five thirty?” Yuri nodded and he swore Victor’s entire face lit up. “Perfect! I’ll probably be busy for most of the day. Meetings. Boring ones, but I've been assured they are completely necessary. If I can’t make it to meals, I’ll see you then!”

“Yes, see you then.” Yuri smiled softly as Victor waved before inclining his head to where Phichit and Leo were still standing in the middle of the room before they exchanged goodbyes and Victor took his leave.

There was a long pause after he left. Yuri watched in concern as Phichit and Leo still just stood where they were, staring through the open door and out into the hall long after Yuri was sure Victor would no longer be visible. Right when he was about to ask if they were okay, they both spun around and stared at him, eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

“Yuri!” Phichit launched into motion, vaulting over the bed and hauling Yuri to his feet and into a tight hug before he could even so much as blink. “I can’t believe it! Yuri gets the first date with the prince!”

“Date? What?” Yuri was struggling to get out of his friend’s grasp. Phichit released him, but only so that he could place a hand on each shoulder. Holding Yuri at arms’ length, Phichit frowned and glared at him. “Why are you looking at me like that? It’s not a date.”
“Ah! I get it!” Phichit was smiling again as he began bouncing up and down. “There’s no need to spare our feelings. We’re still here, so I’m sure Prince Victor will ask us on a date sooner or later.”

“This might be better.” Leo remained on the other side of the bed, but Yuri noticed he was no less excited than Phichit was. “It’s not always a good thing to be first. Now we have the opportunity to pump Yuri for information on what Prince Victor is really like!”

“You’re right! I didn’t even think of that.” Phichit let go of Yuri and folded his hands together in the center of his chest and sent Yuri what he assumed to be the other man’s best doe eyes. “You will tell us everything, won’t you? You wouldn’t leave your good friends hanging?”

“I’m sure there won’t be much to tell, but sure. I’ll give you all the details.” When Phichit screeched in joy, Yuri almost stuffed his fingers into his ears in an effort to save his hearing before he caught himself. “Is this… Is this going to take a while?”

“I’d give him another two minutes.” Leo had dropped back down onto the bed, though Yuri did notice his attention was less on where Phichit was now dancing around the room giggling and humming and more on where Yuri was still standing in shock. “You look tired.”

“It’s been a long day.” Yuri didn’t mention his lack of sleep the night before, but it definitely was a contributing factor. “A long two days, really.”

“You’re right! Oh, and look at us! Forcing you to entertain us when you should be resting up for your date tomorrow.” Phichit bowed low in apology and Yuri couldn’t help but roll his eyes and shake his head.

“You’re no bother. I…”

“Nope! Not another word.” Phichit held up a finger against his own lips. “Leo, let’s go!”

Before Yuri could say another word or try and stop them, they were gone, Leo shutting the door quietly behind him as they went. He could hear Phichit’s excited chatter for a good thirty seconds even through the closed door until he was either too far away to be heard or he had reached his own room and had bid Leo a goodnight.
Yuri sighed and sank down into his chair once more. Now that the other men were gone, he could clearly hear Minako trying and failing to muffle her own laughter from the bathroom.

“Minako?” At Yuri’s voice the laughter grew in volume and he didn’t have to wait long at all for his attendant to stick her head through the doorway and into the room. “What are you laughing at?”

“If I may be so bold as to tell the truth?” Minako asked and Yuri inclined his head in permission. “You.”

“Me?” Yuri groaned and had to resist the urge to bury his head in his hands. “Why are you laughing at me?”

“I’m really starting to wonder if you actually know why you’re here.” Minako steps fully into the room now, arms loaded down with folded pants as she makes her way to the drawers where they belong. “Especially since I get the feeling that you were not pretending to be confused about your friends referring to your outing with Prince Victor as a date.”

“It’s not a date.” Yuri stubbornly replied. “Victor and I… We have an understanding. That’s all. He’s my friend. Like Phichit and Leo are my friends. He probably just wants to ask questions about the other suitors. See if I know anything that might help him before he starts planning his real dates.”

“And I believe that you believe that.” Pants stowed, Minako sashays back towards the bathroom. “Regardless of what you call your time with Prince Victor, they were right. You didn’t sleep well last night and you look absolutely knackered. I’ll draw you a bath. I spoke with the doctor today and he managed to get me some more salts. Eucalyptus with some peppermint and lemongrass this time. Perfect for sore muscles. He also gave me some cream for you to rub on it tonight. It’s supposed to help with the inflammation.”

“That sounds amazing. Thank you, Minako. You didn’t have to go through all that trouble for me.” Yuri tucked his letter away. Maybe he’d be able to figure out something to write in the morning when he wasn’t so tired.

“You know, I can’t tell if you really don’t understand how things are supposed to work around here, or you know and you simply don’t care.” There was the sound of running water from the bathroom and Minako waited until she had stepped back into the room before continuing. “Either way. Don’t ever change.”
“I’ll… Um… I’ll keep that in mind.” Yuri dug through the drawer containing his own clothing, pulling out a pair of shorts and a cotton V-neck. “I can take it from here. You’ve spent most of the day sewing and running around on my behalf. If I’m turning in early, you should, too.”

“I think I will do just that.” Minako brushed her hands off on her skirt and turned to leave. “I’ll wake you up bright and early with some ice for that knee, okay?”

“Okay.”

After his hot bath and spending some time stretching before climbing into bed, Yuri drifted off to sleep easily.

For the time first time since before he was injured, Yuri slept the whole night through.

~

As Victor had warned, they didn’t see him at breakfast or at lunch, though he did drop in right before the afternoon meal to spend some time with the men. Yuri had missed him, however, as Minako has finally managed to drag him kicking and screaming to the royal doctor he’d heard so much about in order to have a full examination so that he could get a prescription for some muscle relaxers and to go over the treatment plan his physical therapist had faxed over.

“He was looking for you.” Phichit was sitting at the spot on Yuri’s left again with Leo on his other side for lunch. Across the way was the man with the two-toned hair who was listening politely to their conversation. Yuri vaguely recalled that he’d introduced himself as Chris before the food had been served and he’d been more concerned with filling his plate. “Prince Victor, that is. He seemed concerned when someone said they thought you’d gone to the doctor. Luckily your attendant was hanging around and she was able to fill him in on exactly what was going on.”

“Oh, well, I’ll just have to apologize for my absence when I see him later.” Yuri brushed off Phichit’s words and went to turn back to his food when a choked off sound of surprise from across the table caught his attention. He glanced up to find the man across from him staring him down with green eyes that were lined with ridiculously long lashes by any standards, though Yuri had to admit he wore them well and had strategically lined his eyes with brown liner to bring out the pop of color of his irises. “I’m sorry… Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Chris, right his name was Chris, hit the palm of his hand against the center of his chest.
“Prince Victor dropped by last night and invited Yuri on a date!” Phichit actually seemed happier about Yuri’s invitation than he did. “They’re going on a walk through the garden before dinner.”

“Are they?” Chris raised an eyebrow and looked Yuri up and down as though seeing him for the very first time. “My, my. That is exciting.”

Yuri shot a glare over at his friend before sighing and turning back to Chris. “It’s nothing. He’s probably going to begin making the rounds with everyone.”

“Not everyone had Prince Victor personally show up in the doorway of their room to ask them out, though.” Leo pointed out and Yuri hoped the other man knew just how lucky he was that Phichit was between them. “Honestly, Yuri. I don’t think he’s asked to do anything with anyone else yet. Unless they’re keeping quiet about it.”

“It’s a walk in the garden.” Yuri wished he couldn’t believe this was as big a deal as they were all making it out to be, but then he remembered… Just because Yuri was here for nothing more than being Victor’s friend at this point, that didn’t mean the rest of them weren’t. “Oh…”

He suddenly thought back to Minako’s comment from the night before.

‘I’m really starting to wonder if you know why you’re here.’

Or, rather, why they were all here. Looking out across the room it hit home in a way it somehow hadn’t been able to previously. There were twenty-five men eating elbow to elbow right now that all wanted the same thing.

Victor.

Twenty-five men that all wanted to pledge their hand in marriage to the Crown Prince of Illéa.

And lucky number twenty-six who didn’t. Lucky number twenty-six that got to spend an hour and a
half with Prince Victor. Alone.

No wonder everyone kept calling it a date.

Yuri would be truly fortunate indeed if dirty looks and muttered insults were the only things he got once the news spread.

“Hmmm…” Chris looked down at him from underneath those thick lashes. “I had thought about sitting with JJ this afternoon. Now I’m glad I chose differently, and not entirely because he’s an obnoxious windbag. Though that is true…”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Don’t tell me you’re trying to ride Yuri’s coattails into the prince’s good graces!” Phichit sounded scandalized and, as Yuri was pretty sure he couldn’t have come up with a coherent response right then if his life depended on it, Yuri let him have the moment. “If you think that you’re going to be able to get Yuri to put in a good word for you when he barely knows you, you’ve got another thing coming, buddy.”

“I never said anything about that. Although if Yuri felt the desire to do so at a future time, perhaps once we’ve gotten to know each other a bit better, I would not be opposed…” Chris cut off a delicate forkful of his grilled chicken and ate it with much more grace than a person should be able to eat a bite of chicken in Yuri’s opinion before clearing his throat and speaking again. “At least you seem to be decent company.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean or even what you are getting at.” Yuri was frowning now. He felt like he was missing an important piece of some kind of puzzle. Something that would be able to help him make sense of what Chris was insinuating.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Chris asked and, when it was clear that it was not obvious to the three men he was speaking to, he elaborated. “It’s very clear who some of the top candidates will be. JJ, Guang Hong, Seung-Gil, you… For those of us who might get stuck in the middle, it wouldn’t hurt to be seen by the side of one of the favorites. At least until the prince has thinned the herd some more and we have a chance to spend more one on one time with him.”

“Wait a minute. Why would you say they are the favorites?” Phichit glanced around to make sure no one was paying them any mind before he wagged his finger at Chris. “What about us?”

“I’m sure you are a lovely person and Prince Victor would be happy to have you as a consort.” Chris waved off Phichit’s accusatory tone with a practiced bat of his eyelashes and an easy smile. “Politics, my dear. It all comes down to politics. You didn’t really believe it when that wonderful woman...
dropped by and told you Crown Prince Victor had the final say in who stays and who goes, did you? Because he doesn’t. At least, not at first.”

Yuri’s mood instantly soured. A hush fell over the four of them as Chris watched them carefully, almost as though he was gauging their reactions to see if he could or would go on with his explanation. Whatever he saw seemed to make up his mind, as he sighed heavily and leant forward, pitching his voice low enough that there was no way anyone at the tables to their immediate sides would be able to hear him.

“You have to look at the political side of the coin. What do Seung-Gil and Guang Hong have? One’s a Two and one’s a Three, but they both have family connections to powerful people in New Asia, a country we are desperately trying to avoid going to war with. Choosing one of them could help keep relations between our two nations smooth.” Chris glanced pointedly over at where the two men in question were both engaged in a quiet conversation with each other and another man Yuri hadn’t met yet. Then he flicked his gaze to the other side of the room where JJ was holding court surrounded by a small crowd as usual. “JJ has connections with Britannia, a nation we are going to want to remain friendly with in case New Asia can’t be put off. I’m not saying any of them will actually win, but if any of those three go home too soon… Well, it might not reflect in a good way in the minds of those who we want to keep friendly.”

“That… Makes a disturbing amount of sense.” Yuri had to admit, Chris might not be wrong. This early in the game, who really knew what it was that kept one person there while another packed their bags. Politics very well could play a factor. Although, by that token… “Except for one part.”

“Only one?” Chris asked, apparently amused. “Do tell. Which part doesn’t ring true to you, my dear?”

“The part about me being one of the favorites.” Everything else Yuri could understand easily enough. That bit eluded him. “There’s nothing special about me. I don’t have important family ties. We’re just Fives. Artists. Entertainers.”

“Exactly.” Chris snapped his fingers. “Look around us, Yuri. There were three Fives here when we woke up yesterday morning. How many do you see left?”

Yuri did as he was told, seeing Phichit and Leo also taking the time to look around the room as well.

“One.” Phichit had managed to get to the point of the exercise first and Yuri felt the bottom fall out of his stomach as his own calculations turned up the same answer no matter how many times he desperately looked around the room hoping it wasn’t true. “Yuri, you’re the only Five left.”
“Not to be crass, but there is a portion of the population that wants to feel represented. A population that is larger than some Twos and Threes want to acknowledge.” And Chris does look sorry to say it. Truly sorry. Enough so that Yuri has a hard time bearing the man any ill will for stating something that should have been obvious to him from the beginning. “For what it’s worth, I think he likes you. I don’t think it was a coin toss between you or the others.”

“Is that meant to be comforting?” Leo’s tone was polite, but cold. Yuri was grateful the other man wanted to defend him, but…

Well, what was the point? Chris wasn’t saying anything that probably wasn’t true. That didn’t have to mean anything had changed between Victor and himself.

That didn’t have to mean he wasn’t Victor’s friend just because Victor also happened to need a token Five hanging around.

Did it?

“It doesn’t matter.” Yuri muttered, trying to play peacemaker. “It really doesn’t. It could be true. It could be false, but whatever the case may be it doesn’t matter. The only thing any of us can do is be ourselves and let Victor sort out what he wants.”

The table fell silent again at his words and he pointedly ignored the odd looks Phichit and Chris were exchanging with each other in favor of savoring the rich cream sauce on his pasta salad.

He couldn’t shake the thought Chris had put in his head, though. The thought that Yuri was convenient. That he was just a means to an end. A way to appeal to the lower castes and keep them in their place.

It was a thought that did not settle well with him at all.

Yuri supposed he could do the logical thing and ask Victor if any part of what Chris had said was true. Victor had said they could be friends. Was that something friends would talk about?

Not normal friends. Yuri knew that much, but this was not a normal situation and they were not
normal friends.

Yuri had about five hours to decide what to do about it.

Then he would see what Victor had to say for himself.
Chapter Five – Understanding

The afternoon passed by simultaneously too quick and nowhere near quick enough.

It was hard to keep his concentration with the buzz of conversation in the Entertaining Room, so Yuri passed on Phichit’s invitation to a game of chess and retreated to a library down the hall as soon as he could. The conversation with Chris still echoed through his head and he hoped that some peace and quiet would help him sort through the emotions that had come with it.

He needed to come up with some way to broach the subject with Victor. A way that wouldn’t put the prince instantly on the defensive. A way that gave Victor a chance to explain himself without making it seem like Yuri was accusing him of… Well, Yuri wasn’t sure exactly what he could be accusing the prince of. Making the decision of who to spend the rest of his life with based on his head and the needs of his country instead of his heart?

But wasn’t that exactly what he was doing? Or could Victor really think that there was someone here he could fall in love with?

Was it even Yuri’s place to ask? Maybe that was too personal?

The library was easy to find and Yuri wandered through the room aimlessly. He wasn’t exactly in the mood to read and none of the titles caught his attention, but he didn’t have any better ideas. When it came to making sure people left him alone, he’d found pretending to have his nose deep in a book was one of the better ways to keep them at bay without seeming rude.

He grabbed a book at random before sinking down into an overstuffed armchair and kicking off his shoes so he could curl his legs up underneath him. He rubbed at the corners of his eyes absentmindedly. This was the longest he’d gone consistently wearing his contacts and he still wasn’t...
Yuri was debating the feasibility of running to his room and grabbing his glasses, at least for however long he was going to be holed up in the library, when a noise caught his attention and he looked up to find that he was no longer alone in the room.

Standing in front of Yuri with his hands on his hips and a self-confident smirk was JJ.

“There you are. We were beginning to wonder where you’d gotten off to. Again.” Without even bothering to wait for Yuri to invite him, or even indicate if his presence was wanted in the first place, JJ took up a spot in the chair directly opposite Yuri. “It’s a great mystery, actually. Where does Yuri Katsuki go when he’s not with us?”

“Well, this time you’ve found me. Mystery solved.” Yuri responded flatly, picking up the book in his lap and angling his gaze back to the text. Hopefully JJ would get the hint and leave him alone.

Either JJ didn’t get the hint, or he purposefully chose not to take it.

“You weren’t here earlier. When you disappeared right before lunch.” JJ crossed his legs and relaxed back into his chair. The picture of casual poise and elegance.

“Are you stalking me?” Yuri put his book down and stared at the other man. For what it was worth, JJ looked briefly uncomfortable, as though he hadn’t expected Yuri to be so blunt and hadn’t been prepared for it. Then the expression was gone and his condescending grin was back in place.

“As if I would ever stoop so low.” JJ scoffed and narrowed his eyes. Yuri couldn’t help but notice how they were an icy blue. Nowhere near as deep and warm as Victor’s were… And there he was getting off track at the least opportune moments again. “I don’t know what you said to the prince yesterday to convince him you’re worthy of keeping around, but we’re not about to let you wander around on your own. If anyone is going to casually bump into the prince in the hall, it’s going to be me.”

“Not to make fun of your genius plan or anything, but how are you going to run into him in the hall when you’re here? In the library. With me.” Yuri had to concentrate in order to keep his own smirk off his face, but he prevailed and JJ sputtered. “Don’t worry about me. I don’t intend on going anywhere. You can have the halls.”
“What game are you playing?” All pretenses of friendly conversation were gone now, not that they had really been there to begin with. JJ was regarding him now with open curiosity and mistrust. “You aren’t like everyone else. Is that your angle? Are you trying to stand out by not standing out at all?”

“Right now I’m trying to read a book. No ulterior motive. Just reading.” Yuri quirked an eyebrow and he could tell the other man was now getting frustrated. Fine. Let him. There was nothing Yuri was trying to hide. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to that.”

Yuri could tell there was more. That JJ wanted to say something else, but he didn’t get the chance.

Someone cleared their throat from doorway and Yuri looked over to find the queen standing there looking as severe as ever.

JJ leapt to his feet and sank into a deep bow as Yuri scrambled to untangle his legs and do the same without falling flat on his face. Queen Lilia offered up a shallow curtsy in return and Yuri felt his toes curl against the thick carpet underneath his feet.

Well, at least he had socks on this time.

“Queen Lilia!” JJ was the quicker of the two of them to recover and he plastered a bright grin across his face before Yuri could even blink. “What a true pleasure running into you here!”

“Yes. A pleasure.” Queen Lilia looked directly past JJ and to where Yuri was just pulling up out of his own bow, blush back in full force due to his surprise. “It is always a joy to see young men with a desire for knowledge.”

“Most certainly.” JJ took a confident step forward, easing back into what Yuri was now coming to understand was a façade. It seemed they all donned a mask or two around here. “Would you happen to have any good recommendations? I find that with such an extensive collection, I am at a loss at where to begin!”

“You could try the formal sitting room two doors down. I think there is some poetry one of my predecessors collected that is stored there. I have been told it is quite excellent.” Yuri couldn’t see JJ’s face from where he was standing, but the other man’s shoulders slumped a bit at the queen’s obvious dismissal. “Or, if poetry is not to your taste, there are some detailed history books in here. It seems as though Mr. Katsuki has already claimed the first volume of the set, however.”
Yuri glanced down at the book in his hands to find that she was right. It was an illustrated account of
the formation of the country. Out of all the things Yuri could have grabbed, this wasn’t the worst.
Fortunately, history had always interested him even if he hadn’t had the time to pursue that interest
much.

“I think I will go seek out that poetry collection.” JJ began to make his way for the door, pausing to
bow again as he pulled even with the queen. “If you will excuse me, Your Majesty.”

Queen Lilia inclined her head and JJ slowly stepped through the door. The picture of unhurried
grace. Yuri felt the muscles between his shoulder blades tighten as soon as the other man was gone
and he realized he was now the sole focus of the queen’s stern gaze.

“Your Majesty.” Yuri wondered if he should bow again or not. Or if he should put his shoes back
on. Or would that draw too much attention to the fact that they were off in the first place? Why had
no one gone over the proper decorum in a situation like this? It was far more important than which
fork was supposed to pair with the salad dish. “I can go if you would like to have the room to
yourself.”

“That won’t be necessary. You may take your seat again if you wish. I will only be a moment.”
Queen Lilia’s tone made her words seem less like an option and more like an order and Yuri sank
back down into his chair, reopening the book and surreptitiously sliding his feet back into his shoes.
“Your Majesty.” Yuri fiddled nervously with one of the pages. “It is no trouble at all to either adjust
or find another space.”

“Someday soon one of you will call this place home the same as I do.” The queen stated plainly and

The queen walked across the room gracefullly and with purpose. Yuri vaguely recalled she had been
a dancer herself once upon a time. Shunning society’s expectations of what it meant to be a Two and
following her heart. His mother had told him her story once, when he had been a young boy and
struggling with the pitfalls that came with trying to learn to move his body in a way that didn’t send
him tumbling to the floor in tears. If Queen Lilia could do it when the whole word was trying to tell
her no, then what were a few bumps and bruises along his own road to his dreams?

“We are guests in your home, ma’am.” Yuri fiddled nervously with one of the pages. “It is no trouble
at all to either adjust or find another space.”

“Someday soon one of you will call this place home the same as I do.” The queen stated plainly and
she stopped in front of the shelves right next to Yuri’s chair. “You are as welcome to use this room in any fashion you see fit as is anyone else that resides here. So long as you don’t vandalize anything, that is.”

“With all due respect, it’s not any of our home, yet.” Yuri pointed out. He noticed the queen look at him out of the corner of her eye. It wasn’t necessarily a soft look, but it did carry less of an edge than it had before.

“Hmmm.” Queen Lilia hummed under her breath, but said nothing further. She pulled out a thin, leather bound book and moved to walk away.

She had almost made it to the other side of the room when Yuri thought of something.

“Your Majesty?” Yuri didn’t move to get up, and there was a hint of a smile on the queen’s lips as she turned around and nodded from him to continue. “We were given a tour of a portion of the ground floor and, of course, the guest wing, but no one thought to tell us if there was a space for exercising. Perhaps a dance studio? I may be a bit out of practice, but if I’m going to be here for some time I’d like to try and regain some of my skills.”

“We do have a dance studio on the grounds.” The queen hesitated, as though she were debating whether or not to reveal its location and Yuri tried not to flinch. Had he asked the wrong question? “You are supposed to be meeting with Prince Victor in a few hours, yes?”

“I am.” Yuri felt his brow furrow in confusion. He wasn’t sure at all how Victor had anything to do with this. He hadn’t even thought about Victor telling others about their meeting either, though it was clear he had told at least his stepmother.

“Have him show you where it is.” This time Queen Lilia was definitely smiling. It was faint, but there. “I think he’d like that.”

“Victor dances?” Yuri couldn’t have stopped that question from spilling out of his mouth even if he’d wanted to and scrambled to cover it quickly. “I-I mean… You don’t have to answer that! I didn’t mean to seem as though I’m trying to get information about him behind his back…”

“I didn’t think you were.” The queen looked amused. Whether she was amused in a good way or a bad way, Yuri couldn’t tell and the uncomfortable feeling rasped along his nerve endings causing a shiver to run up his spine. “We all dance, in some way or another. It’s a skill everyone should learn,
but I don’t suppose I need to tell you that.”

Yuri shook his head slowly. “No, ma’am. I’m sorry for holding you up. I’ll speak with Prince Victor
about it.”

“Please do. Have a lovely afternoon, Mr. Katsuki. I shall see you again at dinner.”

With that she was gone, leaving Yuri alone, as confused as he had been before, and with even less of
an idea what he was going to do about it.

~

Minako had hunted him down half an hour before he was supposed to meet Victor and had
convinced him to come back up to his room so she could refresh the light makeup he was wearing
and add a bit more gel to his hair.

She also convinced him to wear a more formal jacket than he wanted as she rightfully noted he
wouldn’t exactly have time to run upstairs to change before he would be due at dinner with its stricter
dress code. Yuri had to admit that she had a point. Victor had made it seem like he intended to take
every spare moment with Yuri he could get and there was a very real possibility that he would need
to go directly from wherever their wandering took them to dinner.

Yuri was glad she had because when he met Victor at the appointed place and time, he found the
prince to also be dressed for dinner in a dark jacket over a cream shirt and black tie.

“You look wonderful this evening.” Victor had been waiting for him and the prince’s face split into a
wide grin as soon as he caught sight Yuri. As soon as Yuri pulled even with him, he extending his
arm and, before Yuri could talk himself out of it, he found himself sliding his arm into the crook of
Victor’s elbow.

“You don’t look too bad yourself.” Yuri found it was a lot easier to take a compliment and give one
in return now that he didn’t have the weight of some kind of nebulous expectation hanging over him.
“Shall we?”

Victor nodded and they stepped outside.
In their heavy jackets, it was a touch too warm to really be pressed up against each other, but when Yuri tried to take a step away and put some distance between them, Victor tighten his grasp.

“Behind us and to the left.” Victor leaned in and whispered, grin locked firmly in place as though he was listening to Yuri tell a humorous story or joke. “Do you see them?”

Yuri twisted to the side under the guise of looking up at Victor’s face and he did notice the camera crew following them at a discreet distance. Keeping his face a mask of warm interest, Yuri turned to look back ahead. “Cameras?”

“It is my first one on one date with one of the Selected. I couldn’t put them off. I tried, I promise.” Victor let out a tense huff of air and Yuri could feel the tension in his forearm. “I should have sent a note or something to warn you about them. I’m sorry, Yuri. I didn’t think.”

“It’s fine.” When it looked like Victor was about to open his mouth and protest again, Yuri cut in and stopped him. “I’m not just saying that. I understand there are certain… Appearances to keep up. Are they going to follow us the entire time? I was really looking forward to getting some time to talk to you. You know… Friend to friend.”

“Right. Friend to friend.” Victor confirmed, though Yuri had noticed a bit of hesitation on his part. Probably worried about any wayward microphones picking up his statement, Yuri was sure. “I told them we would sit on a bench by the willows for about thirty minutes while they get all the long distance shots they needed and then they are supposed to leave us alone.”

Yuri was about to comment on that. To thank Victor for thinking to ask them to keep their distance even though that probably had been the last thing they wanted to do when he was interrupted by a brown blob almost mowing them down.

“Ah! Makkachin! I was hoping Father would let you out this evening.” Cameras and proper manners apparently forgotten, Victor dropped Yuri’s arm and crouched down, grabbing onto the fluffy poodle at their feet and holding him tightly. “Yuri, meet Makkachin! I’ve had him for ages.”

“Right. I think I’ve seen his picture before.” Yuri did not mention the dog he’d had as a pre-teen and teenager which had been a miniature version of the dog in front of them and who had been named after this poodle’s owner. He figured Victor definitely did not need to know about that right now. Instead, he crouched down next to the prince, laughing as Makkachin wagged his tail and tried valiantly to lick them both. “It’s wonderful to finally get to meet him in person.”
“You like dogs?” Victor’s excited tone and the hope sparkling in his eyes caused Yuri’s heart to lurch in his chest.

“I love dogs. Especially poodles.” Yuri eagerly rubbed the dog behind his ears. “You didn’t tell me you’d invited anyone else to our outing.”

“Perhaps I was afraid you would decline the invitation.” Victor gave his dog a quick peck on the nose.

“Be honest. You thought if I knew Makkachin was an option, I would choose him over you any day.” Yuri laughed as Victor’s face fell for moment before he seemed to realize Yuri was just teasing.

“Yuri!” They both laughed. “That was so mean!”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it. Call it payback for the cameras.” Yuri nudged Victor in the shoulder and with one last scratch behind Makkachin’s ears he get to his feet, pushing up off his thighs for assistance.

He tried to keep any semblance of discomfort off his face while he did it, but he hadn’t done a good enough job of it because Victor was also on his feet and back at his elbow in an instant.

“Oh, Yuri! I forgot about your knee. Come on. We should go sit.” Victor tried to help support him, but Yuri shrugged him off. “Yuri?”

“I’m fine. It really is a lot better.” He wasn’t sure what had caused him to do it. Why he had pushed Victor away. He hadn’t minded their linked arms before, but for some reason the thought of Victor thinking he needed help to walk a few meters irked him. Once again seeing where Victor’ face was threatening to fall, Yuri offered up a smile. “I wouldn’t mind sitting down for a bit, though.”

“Sitting is something I can certainly accommodate.” Victor whistled and Makkachin bounded off across the grass, tongue lolling and tail still wagging at full speed. By the time they had both settled on the bench, the dog was back with a bright red ball resting in his mouth. “Do you mind? I’ve been so busy lately he hasn’t gotten the chance to get out much. I think he would enjoy the chance to stretch his legs.”
“Go ahead. Don’t let me stop you.” Yuri watched as Victor stood up and threw the ball as far as he could, the poodle a brown streak against the vibrant green foliage as he tore off after it. “Where does he stay during the day?”

“In my room mostly. He’s a good dog, but with all the new people coming and going these days, I didn’t want to take the risk of him squeezing past someone coming or going and getting loose out the front. Here in the garden he can go where he pleases, the walls are too high for him to get out, but he can be fast and crafty when he wants to be and I worry about him getting out into the road.” Victor paused as Makkachin returned, barking happily as he dropped the ball at Victor’s feet in a plea to throw it again. Victor happily complied. “My attendant takes him out on the leash a few times a day, but that is no substitute for freedom.”

“I would think not.” Yuri bit his bottom lip, chewing on it and tasting the ridiculous vanilla gloss Minako still insisted on applying at every opportunity. “It must get lonely for him up there.”

“I’m sure it does.” Victor sighed, watching as Makkachin loped back to him for another throw. This time he bent over and gave the dog a hard scratch on his shoulders before retrieving the ball and throwing it again. “I wish I could be there for him more, but Father has me busier than ever these days. He’s been badgering me for years to take a more active role in the day to day operations. I haven’t been able to avoid it any longer. Yurio takes him out every once in a while, but my baby brother is not a dog person and he has his own duties and such to attend to.”

“I could… You know, if you wanted to… I could maybe take him out sometimes during the day.” Yuri scratched nervously at his cheek as Victor turned around, ignoring where Makkachin was now trying to headbutt him in the leg. Yuri felt the cold squeeze of fresh panic rushing up his spine. “But only if you want to! If not feel free to totally forget I ever brought it up!”

“You would really want to?” Victor didn’t sound upset, but his expression was unreadable and Yuri squirmed under the sudden intense scrutiny. “You’re not just saying that because you think it’s what I would want to hear, are you?”

“No! I would never do that!” Yuri frowned and got to his feet. “I like dogs, have a much more flexible schedule than yours, and it would give me an excuse to be outside during the day. Why would you think I’d do something I didn’t want to do just because you might like it?”

“Forgive me. I didn’t think…” And Victor truly did look contrite. Yuri felt another odd tug at his heart. “It’s just… That’s what I’m used to. People telling me what I want to hear. Offering to do what they think I’d want in an effort to curry favor. That doesn’t give me an excuse to jump to conclusions, though. I sincerely apologize if I have offended you, Yuri. It was not my intent.”
“Victor…” Yuri sighed, but forced himself to relax and maintain open body language. “We’re friends. I would never do that to a friend. Just… Just give me a little trust, okay? I promise I won’t take advantage of it.”

“Okay. Trust. Yes. I can do that.” Victor’s grin was back in place, shakier than it had been before, but maybe a bit more real because of it.

Suddenly Yuri felt a strong push against his right knee and he fell forward. In his panic, he reached out to grab the closest thing to him that might be able to break his fall.

The closest thing to him just so happened to be Victor.

They went down hard in a pile of flailing limbs and startled shouts. Yuri twisted one way and then the other, his body trying to both fall onto and away from Victor as it struggled between the instinctual need to protect Yuri’s injured knee while Yuri’s brain desperately tried to override that instinct in favor of not crushing the Crown Prince beneath him.

Yuri supposed in some other universe, this exact same scenario might have been considered romantic. He was, after all, sprawled on top of a very handsome man, chest to chest and incredibly close.

Unfortunately for Yuri, he was painfully aware that in this universe he had kneeed the Crown Prince of Illéa right in the groin on the way down.

“Oh my god! I am so sorry!” Yuri scrambled to get off Victor as quickly as possible without causing either of them further injury. “Shit, shit, shit. Are you okay?”

“Not right now, but I will be. I hope.” Victor was curled in on himself with tears in the corners of his eyes, but he was laughing, too. Yuri couldn’t help but giggle nervously in response. “Oh! Grab Makka!”

Yuri jolted and reached out just in time to grab the poodle by his collar and prevent him from crawling on top of his owner. He was rewarded for his efforts by a slobbery dog tongue licking at his face. “I’ve got him. Shit, I am so sorry.”
“For what? Unless you bribed my dog for the sole purpose of knocking you into me, there isn’t anything for you to be apologizing about.” Well, at least Victor was more or less coherent, even if he was still curled up in a ball with his hands between his legs. “If you did, I’m going to have to say that you have a very roundabout way of trying to physically assault me.”

“I’m still sorry. I could have… I don’t know. Fallen the other way?” Even as he said it, he knew it sounded stupid and when Victor laughed again Yuri wrapped his arms around the dog’s chest and held on tightly while he waited for Victor to calm down. “I’m glad one of us finds this funny.”

“Trust me, Yuri, if I didn’t laugh at this, I’d be crying and neither of us wants that.” Victor groaned as he tried to uncurl for a moment, eventually giving up and resigning himself to his position for the time being. “At least tell me the cameras are gone.”

Yuri had completely forgotten all about the cameras and he looked up with his eyes wide as he scanned the area for their presence. When he didn’t see anyone, he let out a breath of relief before burying his face in Makkachin’s curly fur in an attempt to ground himself.

“They’re gone.” He knew his voice was muffled by the dog’s thick coat, but he heard Victor murmur something that sounded like ‘Thank god’ under his breath.

They spent a long moment in silence, Yuri too scared to come out from hiding in Makkachin’s coat and Victor probably still trying to get himself back under control. Yuri screwed his eyes shut and forced himself to focus on rubbing circles against the dog’s soft chest. Luckily Makkachin seemed to be content to stay perfectly still so long as he was being cuddled.

“Okay, I think I can move now.” Victor’s voice brought Yuri out of his thought as effectively as a bucket of ice water dumped over his head. He risked a peek to find the other man was now sitting upright under his own power. “We should head somewhere with less of a view from the main house, I think. The cameras might be gone, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t other eyes watching.”

Yuri remembers something from earlier in the day. One of the questions he had been hoping to ask Victor before everything had gone horribly awry. Again.

“Queen Lilia mentioned to me earlier today that you would know where there is a dance studio somewhere on the property.” Yuri watched as Victor gave him a curious look. “I know you wanted to walk around the gardens, but I’m thinking walking might not be the best idea for either of us right now. If it’s close, I’d really like to see it.”
“I can’t believe I didn’t think of that myself!” Victor sounded more excited again and Yuri allowed the prince’s good mood to boost his own. He watched as Victor slowly and gingerly got to his feet, mirroring the motion and finally releasing his hold on Makkachin, allowing the dog to bounce around them, sniffing at their knees as though he wanted to see for himself that they were both okay. “It’s not far, and, at this time of day, no one should be in there so it will be much more private as well.”

“Lead the way.”

~

The studio wasn’t far. It was its own separate building tucked away on the east side of the building. Victor had to bother a guard from the main house in order to have it unlocked as he hadn’t thought to bring a key, but it wasn’t more than five minutes before they were safely inside and sprawled out on two mats Victor drug into the center of the hardwood floor in order for them to remain comfortable.

“What do you think?” Victor asked as they settled down with Makkachin lying stretched out on his side between them. “It’s been here for ages, but it didn’t get much use until Father married Lilia eleven years ago. She swept in and spruced the place up a bit. Added the windows and made sure it was stocked with everything anyone could ever need.”

“I love the windows, actually.” Yuri absentmindedly rubbed at the corner of his left eye with one hand as he looked back and forth from the barre and the floor to ceiling mirror to the matching windows on the opposite side. “You can tell that that it would let in just the right amount of light in the morning.”

“Are your contacts bothering you?” Yuri snapped his head around to look at Victor again, the prince flushing a bit and stumbling to explain. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply anything negative. I just remembered that you said the other day you preferred your glasses and I noticed you keep rubbing at your eyes… I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s fine. I was just surprised.” Surprised Victor had even remembered Yuri mentioning something like that. Surprised he cared enough to notice Yuri’s discomfort and have retained the context to figure out why. “I’m getting used to them. It might take some more time before I’m one hundred percent comfortable, though.”

“You should wear your glasses, then. On the weekdays when there aren’t so many social obligations. I’ll talk to Mila and Celestino about it.” Victor said it so casually. As though it wasn’t any trouble at all, but Yuri couldn’t help feeling guilty. Yuri was Victor’s friend, yes, but that didn’t
mean he should get any special treatment or have Victor go out of his way like that.

“You don’t have to do that. I can manage.”

“I want to do it.” There was a fierce look in Victor’s eyes. Almost as though Yuri was taking something away from him and Victor didn’t like it one bit. “Think of it as an exchange for taking care of Makkachin for me. Friends do that, don’t they? Do favors for each other?”

“Yes…” Yuri shook his head slightly to clear out the cobwebs that had suddenly formed there as he’d gotten sidetracked by the fact that Victor really and truly wanted to do something for him with no strings attached. “Fine, but only because it’s an equal exchange.”

Victor nodded and they feel into another companionable silence. Yuri had noticed all their silences were like that. With anyone else Yuri would always be worrying that they wanted him to say something, or that they were disappointed because he couldn’t or wouldn’t start the flow of conversation again.

With Victor it wasn’t like that. It didn’t feel like the prince was waiting for him to cave and offer up another topic of conversation. It also didn’t feel like he was sitting on a mound of words, frustrated because it seemed like Yuri wasn’t willing to receive them. When they spoke, words flowed freely between them and when they didn’t, the pause was mutual and welcome.

Yuri didn’t know what to think about that.

“Are you going to start dancing again?” Victor’s question was soft and Yuri could sense the unspoken addendum. The implication that Yuri could choose to answer or not and Victor wouldn’t press or be offended.

He thought it over before giving his answer.

“I’d like to.”

Yuri glanced over his shoulder at their reflections in the mirror. They made an interesting picture. Both of their jackets and pants were rumpled and their ties were loose. Yuri’s shirt had come untucked at some point and with Victor’s jacket hanging open and not buttoned, Yuri could see a green grass stain marring the cream fabric at his side. Both of their hair were in complete disarray,
gel in Yuri’s hair long gone and his bangs falling into his eyes. There were spots of color on their cheekbones and Yuri had to admit the sight of them like that sent a bolt of something right through his very core that had absolutely nothing to do with friendship.

“You should… I… I would like to see you sometime. Dance, that is.” Victor’s eyes locked onto his through the mirror and Yuri found he couldn’t look away. “Only if you want me to, of course. I would never… I would never show up uninvited.”

“I… Maybe.” Yuri wished he could have said yes. He wanted to. Badly. Probably more than he’d ever wanted anything before in his entire life, but he couldn’t. “I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you.” Victor said softly and Yuri arched an eyebrow.

“For what? I basically told you ‘no’.” Yuri had thought Victor might be upset. But, then again, every time he thought he knew how Victor was going to react to something, the other man always seemed to surprise him.

“For telling the truth. For not agreeing to do something you don’t want to do because I asked for it.” Victor sighed, but he didn’t turn his head. He didn’t look away from where they were still staring at each other through the mirror. Almost as though with the barrier there, it was easier somehow. “People don’t like to tell me ‘no’. Father does, and Yurio doesn’t care a fig about what I think of him, but other than that… Even Lilia will fold sometimes just because it was me that did the asking. It… It gets frustrating.”

“Thank you.” Now it was Victor’s turn to look at him as though he was the one that had lost his mind.

“Why are you thanking me?”

“Same reason.” Yuri shrugged, watching his shoulders rise and fall in his reflection. “For telling me the truth.”

“I promise I will always tell you the truth, Yuri, so long as it is within my power to give.” Victor was serious. Yuri felt his heart rate increase and he was suddenly having difficulty swallowing. “I’m glad… I’m glad that I found a friend.”
Yuri wasn’t sure what he was going to say in response to that. He was sure it would have been embarrassing and far too personal, but he never got the chance to formulate a response as a loud chime rang out over the grounds and they were dumped back into reality.

Dinner was to start in five minutes and they were in desperate need of a change of clothes and a touch up to their appearances.

As they parted to tend to fixing themselves up for dinner, Victor promised to get Yuri a key to the studio so that he could have access whenever he needing it, once again ignoring Yuri’s protests that it wasn’t necessary.

As Yuri let Minako flutter and fuss at him as she frantically tried to get him ready in too short an amount of time, he couldn’t help be both thrilled and terrified in equal measures.

They were friends, now. Definitely. Yuri Katsuki was friends with Victor Nikiforov and it somehow wasn’t a sick joke or some kind of teenage fantasy.

Yuri was totally and completely in over his head, and, for the first time in his entire life, he didn’t care at all.
Chapter Notes

I wanted to make sure to get this update up tonight, so I'll be answering all your lovely comments from the last chapter sometime tomorrow.

About my update schedule. I usually aim to have a chapter up at least once every other day, sometimes faster, rarely longer.

With that being said, I had a medical procedure done at the beginning of this week (nothing major and something that I've had scheduled for a while). This meant I was pretty whacked out on pain meds for like two days. I also apparently tried to write this chapter during that time. It... Did not go well. Hence the later than usual update...

Roughly 75% of those fevered ramblings went right in trash. It was basically a mesh of nothing. Sentences like "And then Makkachin boofed and all agreed it was adorable!" and "Phichit hugged Yuri and yelled 'You want to marry the prince! I'll go get him! You should marry NOW!'"

There also was an entire paragraph of the phrase "OVERCOME CHIHOKO!" written fifty times in a row than my friend informed me I wrote after loudly proclaiming to the nurse in my room at the time that I was going "Away to Tumblr for inspiration! Can't you feel the love!?"

I think the moral of this story is that I should never be left alone around a laptop and painkillers.

Anyways! None of that idiocy ended up here. I hope you enjoy the painfully rewritten chapter!

Chapter Six – Report

The next morning, Yuri met Victor after breakfast by the glass doors leading out into the gardens again. This time Makkachin was with him, pulling against his red leash as soon as the poodle saw Yuri waiting for them.

“I wish I could go with you.” Victor did look a bit put out in Yuri’s opinion, the prince coming as close to a pout as Yuri had ever seen him get. “I’m supposed to have more spare time later today and tomorrow.”

“That spare time is intended to be for you to take the Selected on dates before The Report on Friday and you know it.” Yuri took the leash that Victor offered him with a soft smile he hoped would put the prince at ease. “You can’t ignore them and spend all your time with me.”
No matter how much Yuri wished the opposite could be true.

“You’re right.” Victor looked about as disappointed as Yuri felt. It wasn’t like Yuri could blame him, either. It must have seemed like a daunting task to sort through the remaining men, even if Yuri had already taken himself out of contention. “I wish I knew where to start.”

“I can help with that if you want. I do spend the majority of my own spare time with them.” Yuri was quick to offer the help, if only because it didn’t fail to bring a smile to Victor’s face. A true smile. The kind that made him light up from the inside out. “How many dates were you thinking of trying to fit in?”

“Well, I want at least three more one on one dates and Father suggested the other day that I might try one or two with maybe a handful of the ones I’m not so sure about…” Victor looked more uncomfortable now.

“That makes sense.” Yuri pet Makkachin on the head as he thought about it. “That way there is less pressure if you really don’t have much in common with them.”

“I suppose.” Victor shrugged. “I’m sure it will be awkward no matter how many people I’m with. Reading facts on paper is no substitute for human interaction.”

“I can see that.” And Yuri really could. Hadn’t the Victor he’d grown up watching through television screens and magazine articles turned out to be completely different from the Victor that was standing in front of him? That Victor was always cool and composed, untouchable. And yet that was still the same Victor that let his dog slobber on his tailored pants and who hadn’t been upset at all when Yuri said something utterly stupid without thinking. “Do you remember the men that were in my room when you dropped by?”

“Yes. They seemed… Nice.” Victor nodded.

“They are nice.” Yuri affirmed. “You could start with them. Phichit and Leo. They’re both Fours and very down to earth. I’m pretty sure Phichit could carry on an amicable conversation with a potted plant if he needed to, so there would be no awkward silences.”

“Alright. I can ask them to accompany me when I… I don’t know.” Victor frowned. “Dating is hard.”
“It can be.” Yuri agreed with that sentiment wholeheartedly. It was entirely too difficult to date when you were busy, whether busy meant running a country or dancing ballet apparently. “Phichit likes movies and Leo likes music. Is there somewhere you could take them that could incorporate those two things?”

“There is a small theater in the basement. That might not be a bad idea.” Victor was starting to perk up now. “That’s one date down. What about the others?”

“Has anyone stuck out to you, yet? It doesn’t have to be for anything more than that you like the way they look, or maybe there was an interesting bit of trivia on their applications.” It felt stranger than Yuri had anticipated to give Victor dating advice, especially when that advice boiled down to ‘date someone who’s not me’, but he had to persevere. This wasn’t about him. This was about Victor. Victor who was funny and sweet and didn’t deserve this.

But that was none of Yuri’s business.

“How about Chris? I enjoyed speaking with him when we met.” Yuri nodded in encouragement and Victor looked pensive again. “I don’t suppose you know what he might like.”

“I think he is the kind of person who wouldn’t care where you took him so long as the company was good.” Yuri had to admit that he respected Chris’ pragmatism and bluntness. Victor seemed to like those traits well enough, so they should be a decent match. “I think you’d enjoy him more one on one, though. He has a large personality. You wouldn’t want anyone else to feel overwhelmed and like they needed to overcompensate. What about brunch, or maybe a light snack before dinner or something along those lines? That’s casual enough and would give you time to talk.”

“I should just hire you to be my assistant. You’d be perfect at it.” Victor paused in order to glance down at his watch. “Except for the fact that you always seem to make me late.”

“I’m sorry! I should have been paying more attention to the time!” Yuri jumped to apologize when he noticed that Victor was grinning at him and not seeming to be in a hurry at all. “Wait a second. Are you teasing me?”

“Turnabout’s fair play.” Victor laughed as Yuri shook his head in defeat. “I’m not late, but I really do have to go if you don’t want me to be. When you’re done playing with Makkachin, you can just take him back to my room. He’ll be fine there until after dinner.”
"I can’t." Yuri couldn’t hold back a heavy sigh at Victor’s look of confusion. “We’re not allowed on the third floor at all. To protect the Royal Family’s privacy. Or to prevent snooping. I’m not sure. It might actually be a little of both.”

“What if I said you could?” Victor was frowning now, as though he were angry with himself for not thinking of this sooner. “What good is being a prince if you can’t decide who is allowed to go where in your own home?”

“That would look like favoritism. You wouldn’t want the others to get jealous.” Yuri pointed out. “It could come back to bite you in the long run if they think I’m your favorite and not just your friend.”

“Right. We wouldn’t want anyone thinking anything like that.” Victor tapped his lips with his right index finger. Yuri had noticed he tended to do that when he was deep in thought. Yuri twined the leash in his hands through his fingers as he waited for the prince to come up with a solution. “I guess there’s nothing else for it. You’ll just have to take Makka back to your room and then I can either retrieve him later or Minako can come take him home when she gets a spare second. Minako is your attendant, right?”

Yuri nodded and Victor’s bright grin was back as he clapped his hands together. “Perfect! I’ll have notes sent to Phichit, Leo, and Chris. Thank you so much for everything, Yuri. I don’t think I’d be able to get through this without you.”

“I’m sure you would have figured something out.” Yuri brushed off Victor’s compliment automatically and they exchanged a hasty goodbye before Victor hugged his poodle and left them alone, off to some unspecified location within the palace where the king was waiting for him to begin some kind of meeting.

Yuri looked down at where Makkachin had begun to paw at the base of the glass doors, impatient to be outside now that his master was gone.

“I guess it’s just you and me this morning, buddy.” Yuri felt a warm rush at the thought of getting to spend an hour or so outside stretching his legs with the dog. That he was trusted with this responsibility.

That he was apparently someone who could be trusted with this responsibility.

And if there was still an odd rumbling in the back of his mind that had kicked into life at the casual
mention of Victor sending invitations for dates with other men, Yuri did his best to ignore it.

It wasn’t his business after all.

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The next day at dinner Phichit and Leo were all smiles and happy chatter. Yuri listened politely as they went on about their double date with Victor and the movie theater downstairs.

“Oh, did I tell you that Victor is going to send someone to get my hamsters from home?” Phichit had barely touched his food and was bouncing in his seat. “He couldn’t believe they wouldn’t let me bring them in the first place!”

“Oh, really?” Leo wasn’t quite as excited as Phichit, but Yuri could tell he was pleased with how the date had gone as well. “I’m sure Yuri doesn’t want to keep hearing about our date, though.”

“I don’t mind. Really, I don’t.” Every time either Phichit or Leo caught themselves and tried to offer up an apology, Yuri cut them off before they could get too far. “I’m glad he asked and glad you both enjoyed it.”

“I heard Chris talking to some of the other men earlier. They had tea in one of the parlors this afternoon.” It seemed as though some of Phichit’s manic energy was finally wearing off and he was coming back down to earth. His words were back at a normal pace, at least. “And he’s having a private dinner with Seung-Gil right now. I guess when Prince Victor decides it’s time to start courting us, he does not slack off. Although he didn’t seem this keen to move onto the next contestant after his date with Yuri…”

“I’m sure if he had the time, he would have. His duties don’t stop just because we showed up on his doorstep.” Yuri hadn’t told the others about his conversation with Victor the day before. He hadn’t told them a lot of things. As much as he liked them, he wasn’t stupid and he did understand they were all there because they wanted Victor. Even telling them he wanted to be friends with Victor and nothing more could be used against him if the wrong person found out. “I’m sure he’ll be spending as much time as he can with all of us when his schedule allows.”

“It’s good practice.” Leo poked at the grilled chicken on his plate. “He’s not going to stop being busy as soon as he gets married. Hopefully, he’ll stop dating twenty-five other guys, though.”
Yuri laughed at the joke and nodded his head in agreement. “I’m sure it won’t be quite this bad. Victor seems like the kind of person that would want his spouse to be involved as much as possible. If they wanted to be, that is.”

“I get what you mean. Some of the men here look like they hope their only duty in the future will be to sit still and look pretty.” Phichit shot a glare down at the table closest to where the Royal Family, sans Victor, were eating. They were a mix of Twos and Threes with JJ at the head, a man named Georgi at his right-hand side, and all of them looking as though they had been born to sit on some kind of throne, even if it was one of their own making. “For what’s it’s worth, I don’t think Prince Victor will fall for that. He’s… Surprisingly down to earth… If a bit on the stiff and formal side.”

Yuri let the conversation flow around him at that point. He focused on eating his food. Focused on the simple motion of bringing his fork from his plate to his mouth and back again. As long as he was doing that, chewing and swallowing and repeating the cycle of fork to mouth to plate to mouth, he wasn’t able to think of much else.

That way he was definitely not able to think about Victor, Phichit, and Leo laughing in the dim lighting of a movie theater. Or Chris and Victor sharing tea in one of the perfectly furnished parlors and enjoying each other’s company. He couldn’t even think about how Victor’s seat at the high table was empty because he was looking across an intimate setting for two with Seung-Gil on the other side.

Nope, he wasn’t thinking about any of that at all.

Maybe if he kept saying it, it might even become true.

By the time they were done eating and had been dismissed from the dining hall, the topic of their talk had moved on from the prince and onto their upcoming debut on The Report just a day and a half away.

“Aren’t you nervous about it? The whole country is going to be watching.” Leo did look nervous, in Yuri’s opinion. He was biting on his bottom lip and fiddling with the ends of his hair as they made their way to the second floor and their rooms. “What if we say something stupid? What questions are they even going to ask us? Are they going to ask us questions?”

“I’m sure if they are going to ask us any questions they would have told us by now so we would have time to prepare.” Phichit pat his friend on the back and sent Yuri a look as though he wanted him to help. “Don’t you think, Yuri?”
“There’s too many of us still to do live interviews with I would think. It would take up the entire broadcast.” Which was perfectly fine by him. The less public speaking Yuri had to do the better. He wasn’t a total stranger to speaking in front of crowds, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed it. “I wouldn’t worry about it, Leo. Phichit’s probably right.”

“I hope they at least let us sit together. I’d feel better knowing I had some friends with me.” Leo stopped messing with his hair and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I know we’re supposed to be competing against each other and everything, but…”

“But nothing!” Phichit danced forward, maneuvering his body so they he was facing the pair of them walking backwards down the hall. “We’re friends and friends are there for each other no matter what man might try to come between them. Let’s make a pact! No matter who the prince chooses, even if it is one of us, we won’t hold it against each other, and we’ll keep in touch and write letters and call and spend holidays together and exchange Christmas presents and… And I don’t know. Just everything that best friends are supposed to do!”

“Seriously?” Leo didn’t sound completely convinced.

“I like the idea.” Yuri didn’t share Leo’s reservations. Phichit was not the kind of person who would hide ill intentions behind the guise of friendship. Perhaps it should have felt strange to Yuri. He’d gone through five years with the National Ballet having made no true lasting connections and yet, here he was, barely a week here and he’d made a handful of solid friendships. It should have felt strange, but it didn’t. It was like he’d been waiting his whole life to meet these people. “Like an alliance. Only without the backstabbing and more gift exchanges.”

“I was thinking closer to ‘best friends for life’, but an alliance works, too.” Phichit grinned and jumped back a few steps in his excitement. “Come on, Leo. Yuri’s in! You should be, too.”

“Okay, fine.” Leo’s face brightened a bit and Yuri could tell some of his nerves were bleeding away. “I’m in.”

“Yay!” Phichit spun around in circles right there in the middle of the hall, completely ignoring the dark looks two other men, Hayden and Kieran he was pretty sure their names were, gave him from a few doors down. “This calls for a celebration! To Yuri’s room!”

Why they always ended up in his room, Yuri didn’t know for sure. It probably had something to do with the way it was tucked back away from everyone else’s room. It also tended to be the least
crowded since Phichit and Leo had three attendants each that all liked to be in the thick of things when they could. Minako had made her offer again to have more people assigned to take care of Yuri’s needs, but he had put her off again, perfectly happy with the way things were.

Phichit led the way, stepping back only once he reached the door to the room so that Yuri could step forward and use his key. Yuri stepped into the room first and was almost knocked back onto his ass as Makkachin launched himself off Yuri’s bed and immediately ran up to the man, leaping up onto his hind legs and placing his paws on Yuri’s shoulders, licking the underside of Yuri’s chin as he dug his fingers into curly fur and laughed as he wobbled on his feet.

“Yuri! You didn’t tell us you had a dog!” Phichit watched as Yuri pat Makkachin on the head and pulled his paws off of him, allowing the dog to drop back onto all fours as he moved onto to snuffling at the shoes of the new men. “Wait a minute…”

“That’s Prince Victor’s dog.” Leo had his hands up and raised away from his body as Makkachin nudged his big head against the other man’s knee. It looked like he was too scared to reach and touch the dog for some reason. “I recognize him from the pictures in the magazines. Yuri… What is Prince Victor’s dog doing in your room?”

Yuri simply shrugged, following the dog as he wandered back towards the bed, realizing he wasn’t going to get the pets he was looking for and going to curl back up on the foot of Yuri’s bed. “I guess Victor hasn’t had a chance to come get him, yet. I can call Minako to come take him back. Actually, I probably should. Victor might want him as soon as he done with his date.”

“Is there something you aren’t telling us?” Phichit was looking at him suspiciously, both of them still hovering just inside the open door. Yuri frowned and sank down onto his bed, idly running his fingers through Makkachin’s fur as the dog was quick to deposit his head in Yuri’s lap as soon as he was settled. “Did something happen between you and the prince on your date that you didn’t tell us about? I mean, it’s totally cool if you don’t want to say, but you know… Inquiring minds would like to know.”

“I’ve already told you everything. I promise.” Yuri scratched Makkachin behind the ear, grinning a bit as the dog let out a low sound of approval and leant into the touch. “Victor said I could take Makkachin out to the gardens some days when he’s busy. It’s either this or the poor baby gets locked in Victor’s room for most of the day. I guess I didn’t think to tell you. Not because I’m trying to hide it or anything! Because I didn’t think it was that important. It’s just taking a dog for some walks.”

“Let’s see here, you call him ‘Victor’ and you have his dog in your room.” Phichit pointed out. “Can you blame us for maybe jumping to a conclusion or two?”
“What else am I supposed to call him?” Once again Yuri could not quite follow exactly where Phichit’s train of thought was taking him. “Is that not his name? Has everyone been lying to me my entire life?”

Leo didn’t look amused. In fact, he looked completely blank and so did Phichit. “I don’t know. You could call him Prince Victor like all the rest of us do.”

“Oh…”

Oh.

Yuri hadn’t thought of that. He ran his mind over every interaction he’d had over the past week and he felt the blood rush out of his face. Leo was right. Literally everyone else called Victor by his title. Yuri was the only one who didn’t. Oh god… How had he not caught onto that by now? Why hadn’t anyone told him?

Why hadn’t Victor told him?

“Oh. My. God. I’ve been making a huge fool of myself this entire time and no one said anything!” Yuri pulled his glasses off his face, glad that Victor – Prince Victor damn it – had spoken with those in charge of the Selected and told them to let him begin wearing them when he wasn’t scheduled to be on camera. Right now they were just in his way, though, as he buried his face in the thick fur between Makkachin’s shoulder blades.

“I’m pretty sure if the prince didn’t like it, he would had mentioned something.” Leo sank down onto the bed next to him and pat Yuri awkwardly on the back. “No one wanted to assume, but… Well, others have noticed.”

“Roughly two-thirds of the Selected are supremely jealous of you.” Yuri felt Phichit bounce onto the bed behind him. “The other third have started taking bets on when Prince Victor is going to do away with all the pretense and just ask you to marry him already. I don’t even think they’re mad about it.”

“It’s not like that!” Yuri turned his head so that he wasn’t speaking directly into the poodle’s coat. “I just apparently have no manners. Victor and I… Shit. Prince Victor and I are friends. Nothing more. I promise.”
“Have you told Prince Victor this?” Phichit asked and Yuri nodded, not trusting himself to speak right then. “Okay, okay. We believe you. Calm down. It’s not really any of their business what you and prince have worked out between each other. You can trust Leo and I not to say a word.”

“Thank you.” Yuri sat up and forced himself to relax. He was going to freak out, but later. When he was alone for the evening. “I should call for Minako. Get her to take Makka back to where he belongs.”

“Solid plan.” Phichit hopped up and skipped over to the button hidden in a recessed section of wall by Yuri’s bookcase and pressed it, effectively calling for Minako. “Then you can tell us all about your ‘friendship’ with the prince.”

“Phichit!”

“Sorry, sorry. Couldn’t help it!” Phichit laughed and Yuri couldn’t even bother to pull together a frown. Don’t worry, Yuri. We’ll help you sort it out. That’s what friends are for!”

Right, friends.

Because Yuri had those now.

Wow…

Despite his embarrassment, Yuri felt the glow of contentment wrap around him. This wasn’t exactly how he thought his life was going to go a month ago, but he found he couldn’t complain.

And he definitely didn’t want to go home. Not now. Not when he was finally starting to feel like he’d found a place to belong.

And if that wasn’t totally crazy, Yuri didn’t know what was.

~

The afternoon of their appearance on *The Report* flew by in a nervous haze. Even knowing he
would have to do very little, really just sit there with a pleasant expression on his face, Yuri was still nervous.

As was almost everyone else.

*Almost.*

“If anyone wants any hints or tips for how to figure out their best angle while on camera, you can always ask me.” JJ once again was the center of attention, though this time Yuri had to admit there was a good reason for it. The other man had been a model. He actually was an expert on these kinds of things. “Remember, the camera adds ten pounds so ask your stylists about wearing something dark. It’ll be incredibly slimming!”

“I hate that jerk, but he does have a good point.” Emil’s station was right next to Yuri and he looked out of the corner of his eye at the taller man’s statement.

“I’m impressed he isn’t trying to sabotage us.” Chris was at Yuri’s other side, and the blonde was leaning forward in his chair as he applied a liberal coat of mascara to his already insanely long eyelashes. “What do you think, Yuri? Should we ask our stylists about dark colors and go test out of best angles?”

“I think I just want tonight to be over with.” Yuri used his index finger to adjust where his contact was fitting in his left eye in the hopes that it would stop itching. “Besides, I intend to firmly plant myself in the back row. I don’t think the angle I hold my head is going to matter much back there.”

“I can sit directly in front of you if you’d like.” Emil offered. Yuri knew he was only joking, but he’d be lying if he wasn’t tempted to take him up on it. “Might as well use my height advantage for the greater good.”

“Would you?” Yuri asked, allowing his tone to remain flat. Emil laughed and so did Chris.

“I’ll bet if Emil and I work together we could hide you completely.” Chris slid the wand of his mascara back into its tube with a sharp click.

“I would be eternally in your debt.” Yuri grabbed the tube of gloss sitting on the counter in front of his mirror. He might as well apply the stuff and get it over with. Once his stylist was done curling
Guang Hong’s bangs, the man was going to be over here forcing it on Yuri anyway. “They aren’t going to let that happen, are they?”

“I wouldn’t hang your hat on it.” Chris muttered, now moving on to adjusting the green tie he was wearing. Yuri had to admit that other man looked as handsome as ever. The tie brought out the deep emerald hues in his eye, and the brown eyeliner he was wearing helped with that contrast immensely. “It won’t be so bad. They’ll probably ignore us for the most part.”

“I doubt that, but thanks for saying it.” Yuri rolled the gloss over his index finger and used that to apply it to his lips. “Are you nervous?”

“About as nervous as any of us.” Chris shrugged. He certainly didn’t look nervous, but Yuri knew better than most that there could be more simmering just below someone’s surface. “Although, some of the other men look a little green around the gills, so I’m doing better than them.”

Yuri glanced around the room to find Chris was right. About half of the men looked like they were a few seconds away from losing the light lunch they’d been provided. Leo in particular seemed to have a green tinge underneath his tan, and he was staring off into space as Phichit chattered happily as his side, entertaining both him and the soft spoken Guang Hong who didn’t look entirely comfortable either.

“Oi! Scoot over.” Yuri jumped and just about fell out of his seat as Yurio elbowed past him and took up a spot half hidden behind the large mirror in front of him. “If any of you fuckers tell anyone where to find me, I will tell Victor that you all have disgusting growths somewhere embarrassing. Maybe your asses. I don’t know. I’ll get creative.”

“You don’t have to threaten us. No one is going to tattle on you.” Yuri went back to smoothing out some imaginary wrinkles from his shirt, more because he felt the urge to keep his hands moving than any really need to do so. Minako had made sure his clothing was immaculately pressed and ready to go as usual. “Who are you running from this time?”

“Beka. And my father.” Yurio grunted and crossed his arms over his chest, ducking his head so that his blonde bangs fell over most of his face, though Yuri wasn’t sure exactly what that was going to accomplish when it came to hiding him. There was no one here that had such a distinctive head of golden hair. “I still don’t even know why I need to be here. I’m not the one who’s trying to pick a husband from a group of losers.”

“Are you this kind to everyone, or just the ones you really like?” Chris asked amiably.
“Fuck off.” Was the grumbled response, and both Yuri and Chris quirked their lips upwards at the same time, sending each other a knowing look through their respective mirrors.

Emil just looked like he would now rather be anywhere else but there.

“You’re the one that wants us to hide you.” Yuri stopped messing with his shirt in an effort to prevent himself from creating any wrinkles and moved on to patting down some of the hairs at the top of his head that were trying to defy the gel they had been coated in. “If we fuck off then you’ll definitely be seen.”

“No one asked for your fucking opinion.” Yurio snarled, but he didn’t make a move to leave, nor did he say anything further, choosing to stand in sullen silence and glower at all three of them periodically.

No one said anything when the stylist returned and batted Yuri’s hand out of his hair. Yuri noticed the man sent nervous glances toward the young prince, but he seemed to understand that his presence there was not something that needed to be addressed. Instead he focused on making sure Yuri was ready to go before moving on to Emil and then Chris.

Once everyone was camera ready, they were shown into the broadcasting room.

Everything looked exactly as it ever had aside from the tiered seating off to the side where the Selected were to sit. Yuri made a beeline for the third row, not bothering to try and fuss with the group of fifteen Selected that were all fighting for a seat in the ten spaces right in the front.

As soon as he realized he wasn’t going to be allowed to follow them, Yurio scurried off. Hurrying in the opposite direction of where Victor, King Yakov, and Queen Lilia were having a quiet conversation in the corner of the room.

Victor noticed them filing in and paused in his conversation for a moment to send the group one of his flashier smiles, waving happily as a few of the Selected waved in return. He scanned his blue eyes over the crowd until he found Yuri and when he winked Yuri couldn’t help but roll his eyes and throw a small wave back at him.

King Yakov instantly noticed his son’s distraction and popped the taller man on the back of his head to draw his attention back to whatever they were discussing and Yuri snorted in amusement, noticing
Chris had seen the exchange as well and looked just as amused.

They settled into their seats with a minimum of fuss, Yuri in the far back corner with Phichit at his side and Leo next to Phichit. Chris and Emil settled in next to Leo, and in front of him were Guang Hong and Seung-Gil, both of them as silent as ever.

Phichit was quick to lean forward and draw them into a quiet conversation. Yuri was starting to formulate a theory that Phichit had made it his mission in life to befriend every single person on the planet, no matter how shy or prickly, and Yuri left him to it. Now that he noticed the cameras swooping around as the technicians checked to make sure everything was working properly he felt the pinch of nerves in the pit of his stomach.

It’s a performance. Just another performance. Nothing new. No one was even going to expect him to speak.

For the first time since arriving, Yuri wished he had left his contacts in his room. He’d never worn them when he’d danced, finding it easier when the audience was nothing more than vague shapes and blurs. He did not have that luxury today.

“Mr. Katsuki.” Yuri sat up a little straighter and turned to look down from their raised platform to find the dark haired young man that followed Yurio around staring up at him. Yurio called him Beka, but Minako had once told him the man’s proper name was Otabeck. “Sorry to bother you, but I am supposed to locate Prince Yurio and make sure he is in his proper place for the broadcast. Would you happen to know which general direction he ran off in?”

“The last I saw of him, he was heading over towards those racks of clothing.” Yuri inclined his head in the direction he meant and Otabeck’s dark eyes followed the motion. “I would start there.”

“Thank you. I do apologize for the intrusion.” Otabeck bowed his head slightly.

“Don’t worry about it. Just make sure he doesn’t find out I told you.” Yuri warned. He was pretty sure Victor wouldn’t believe anything his younger brother might make up about him, but it didn’t hurt to cover his bases.

“Of course.” Otabeck’s lips quirked up into a sardonic smirk. “Thank you, again. Good luck.”
With that he was gone, lost in the shadows around the edges of the room.

It didn’t take long after that for the area to erupt into a frenzied buzz as the royal family took their places on their own raised dais, Victor front and center and Yurio wedge between his father and stepmother. Yuri noticed a man name Hayden turn pale and hurry off to the side where an assistant waited with a bucket.

Yuri did not need to look to know what that was for.

About thirty seconds before they went live, Hayden returned, an assistant shuffling him into a place on the end of the middle row, whispering instructions in his ear as they went. Yuri was just glad he’d kept his lunch on the lighter side. He’d probably be starving by the time dinner rolled around, but at least the rolling nerves in his stomach didn’t have much to work with.

Then there wasn’t time for him to think about anything at all because the lights went bright and the national anthem began to play and it took all his attention to make sure he was sitting up straight and kept a pleasant smile on his face.

“Good evening and welcome to The Report!” The show’s usual host stepped forward into the spotlight. Yuri wasn’t even sure where he’d come from, as he hadn’t been hanging around anywhere he could see, but he supposed it didn’t matter. He was here now and cheerfully going over the agenda for the evening.

It felt like the broadcast lasts forever. Yuri can feel sweat trickling down the back of his neck. About fifteen minutes in, the starched collar of his shirt begins to chafe and his right knee aches from sitting still for so long. He longs to shift around in his seat or straighten his leg out in front of him, but he refrains. Every so often he can feel Victor’s eyes fall on him and they exchange supportive looks, almost as though they both know exactly how torturous it is to still stock still while others drone on about the news.

If Victor does the same with anyone else, Yuri doesn’t notice it.

Finally, right when Yuri thinks he’s going to lose it and slump over in his chair regardless of the shame it will bring on his family, Morooka is introduced and Yuri can see the end of this nightmare rapidly approaching.

Or maybe just the beginning because as soon as Morooka has gone through his own introductions he
zeroes in on Victor and the screen that has been wheeled out so they can play some of the clips they have gathered during the week.

“For those of you who have been following along with our special broadcasts during the week, you’ve seen the Selected arrive, you’ve seen them go through their makeovers, and we’ve aired several interviews.” Morooka turns and gives his full attention to where Victor is sitting, media perfect smile on his face. “Prince Victor, we’ve also seen the first eight go home and I’ve been told you’ve been on several dates with those remaining.”

“Yes. I was able to spend some time with the remaining Selected this week.” Yuri notices Victor scanning their section and he sits up a bit straighter, knowing the camera is probably panning over them in order to gauge their reactions. “I look forward to getting to know them even better over the next month or so.”

“Ah, so we should take that to mean this won’t be a quick Selection, then?” Morooka raises an eyebrow and Victor laughs. A fake laugh. Yuri can tell.

And isn’t that a funny thought? That Yuri can now tell when Victor is playing to an audience or when he’s being real. He was sure if he had the time to examine it, that thought would have made him dizzy, but right now he’s dizzy enough from being under the bright lights for an hour that it’s hard to tell.

“Well, I want to be fair to everyone involved.” Victor says, playing the diplomat for now. “They are all so different and each man brings something new to the table. This is definitely going to be one of the hardest choices I’ve ever had to make… And I once had to decide which china would pair well with the décor when the queen of Britannia visited last summer.”

That comment brought a laugh from most of those on the stage, even Queen Lilia couldn’t quite hide a thin smile. Although, Yurio looked as stony and irritated as ever.

“Surely there are one or two men who have stood out to you?” Morooka presses and Yuri is getting the urge to squirm in his seat again. He hadn’t gotten the chance to speak to Victor alone since he began going on his dating spree. He’d heard his fellow Selected’s side of the story of their encounters, but he had no idea what Victor had thought of any of them. “Please, Your Highness. The country wants to know. Do you have a favorite?”

“I wouldn’t say I have a favorite, but there are a few that I have been able to spend some time with that I think will be sticking around for some time yet.” Victor’s expression clearly showed he was not going to go into detail, no matter how much he’s pressed and Yuri tried to force himself to relax. It
wasn’t like Victor was going to talk about him anyway. “There is one man, though, and I won’t say any names so as not to put a target on his back, but I do have to say I admire his spirit. Do you know, he actually snapped at me the first time we met?”

Or maybe Yuri had relaxed too soon.

Seriously, out of the all the things from that night they had met underneath the willow trees, that was what Victor was going to bring up now? On national television? In front of everyone?

“Really?” Morooka’s voice rose about a full octave in his excitement. It was clear he hadn’t expected for Victor to give him even that much. “Is there a story that goes along with that?”

“Not one that I’m going to tell.” Victor winked at the reporter and Yuri felt the heat of a blush rising up the back of his neck. “But I will say this, he is incredibly cute when he’s angry.”

Oh, yes. Yuri was going to kill him. Crown Prince or not, as soon as Yuri managed to get the other man alone, he was so dead.

“I’m sure he’ll be pleased to hear it.” Morooka was definitely wrong. ‘Pleased’ was most certainly not on the list of current emotions Yuri was feeling. He tried to keep his features schooled into an impassive mask as the men around him shuffled around and whispered among each other. Clearly no one knew exactly who Victor was referring to.

“I don’t remember anyone snapping at him that day we met him.” Phichit whispered at Yuri’s side. “Who do you think he could be talking about?”

“I don’t know.” Yuri whispered back. Best friend or not, that was a secret Yuri was taking to his grave. “I’m sure they won’t admit to it.”

Phichit nodded in agreement and they both turned back to where Morooka was drawing everyone’s attention to the screen now.

“I know the whole country is on the edge of their seats to see a sneak peek of those dates.” Morooka was grinning as the screen flickered to life. “As a reminder, we’ll be airing a special edition of The Report on Saturday evening showing a few more interviews and more footage from the dates! Please mark your schedules because you won’t want to miss it!”
Yuri watched as images flickered across the screen. He tried not to pay them any mind. Even knowing that they were all aware none of the prince’s date were truly private, Yuri felt too much like an interloper, especially when the camera cut to a brief clip of Yuri and Victor crouched down next to Makkachin, deep in conversation and not paying even the slightest bit of attention to the camera crew that had either been much closer than Yuri had remembered or who had been in possession of a particularly high powered zooming lens.

“You certainly look like you were enjoying yourself, Your Highness.” The screen went blank again and Victor smiled softly as Morooka’s words, more like his real smile than anything he’d given so far.

“I was. Like I said, they all have their own ways of surprising me.” This time Yuri wasn’t imagining it. Victor was looking at him. Their eyes locked for a brief moment before Victor looked away and Yuri felt a shiver of something run down his spine. “I can only hope they keep continuing to do so. I always have loved a good surprise.”

There was a bit more back and forth between Morooka and the king, banter about the king’s own Selections. Words that went completely over Yuri’s head because Victor words were still echoing in his mind.

*I always have loved a good surprise…*

Then the lights went down and the world lurched into frantic motion once again. The Selected were ushered out of the room and told their dinners would be brought to them this evening as the royal family would be engaged for the rest of the night going over the numbers from the broadcast.

It was over. The worst was behind them. They could all breathe again.

Everyone except Yuri.

And if he spent the whole night tossing and turning as Victor’s deep voice whispered nonsense about surprises in his ears, well, that was another secret Yuri was going to take to his grave.
Chapter Seven – Awareness

Yuri didn’t see Victor again until Sunday afternoon, and not alone.

“Why do we have to do this again?” This time Yuri had been shuffled over to a station next to a tan man with spiky chestnut hair and eyes that actually looked purple in certain lighting. He’d introduced himself as Michele before slumping down in his seat and proceeding to sulk for roughly five minutes.

“Something about an article in a magazine wanting to run a column on who looks the most like a real prince next to Prince Victor.” Yuri wasn’t pleased about this newest curveball either, but he’d already come to the conclusion that complaining about it didn’t mean it was going to go away. “It shouldn’t take too long. Mila said something earlier about us being free to go as soon as our sessions with the photographers are done.”

“Is this what it’s going to be all the time?” Michele didn’t seem comforted by Yuri’s words as he slumped down in his chair and shoved his hands into the pockets of his formal dress pants. “Some of us have barely gotten to spend time with him and now we’ve got to dress like matching dolls and stand next to him like this is a thing that’s actually going to happen?”

“It is a thing that’s going to happen. For someone, at least.” Forcing himself to keep his hands still at his sides so as not to ruin his own pressed and perfect suit, Yuri turned to face the other man fully for the first time since they’d sat down together.

Yuri was dimly aware of people coming and going in the background. Of the photographer shouting instructions at assistants as they adjusted the deep blue velvet drapes that were to be the backdrop for the formal photos they were to be taking with Victor shortly. Behind him, to the side of him, and
even in front of him were Selected and their attendants scurrying around putting the final touches to hair and makeup. Twenty-six men all dressed in the same dark suit. Carbon copies of each other down to their shoes, the only thing setting them apart being the things not as easily changed, their eyes and hair and facial features. Different heights and weights and levels of fitness.

This wasn’t any of their lives. Not really. Not even JJ with his modeling career and TV appearances. This was Prince Victor’s world and they were just interlopers. Cogs trying to fit into the machine that was the royal family. Take one out and put another one in to see which one fit the closest.

To see which one would keep the machine running with the least amount of squeaking and shuddering.

“Maybe for you.” Yuri had been so deep in thought for a second that he’d almost forgot he’d been talking to someone. Michele still wasn’t even looking at him, his gaze focused on where Mila was having an intense conversation with Celestino about their schedules for the rest of the day. “Do you…? Do you ever wonder if you made the right choice when you sent in that application? Do you ever wish you’d never done it at all?”

There were about five different answers Yuri could have given right then. All of them would have been true in one way or another.

None of them would be the whole truth, though.

His internal confliction lasted no less than ten seconds, but in that span, he caught sight of Victor stepping into the room over Michele’s shoulder.

His answer came instantly and instinctually, falling out of his mouth before his brain could stop him.

“No. No, I don’t.”

~

Everyone is in a nervous frenzy as they get ready for their turn to have their mock official portraits with the prince taken.
Yuri spent most of his time waiting with Phichit and Leo and Guang Hong, who Phichit had apparently brought into the fold of his friendship pact sometime over the past two days. They pulled four stools together into the corner of the room and talked, ignoring the hustle and bustle and flashes of light from the cameras.

“Do you think we should be showing more of an interest?” Guang Hong wasn’t exactly nervous, Yuri had noticed. He was more of a quiet calm, as though he was constantly calculating variables in his head and was trying to work through to the perfect solution for problems that hadn’t even happened yet. “I know we don’t want to seem overeager, but it is wise not to seem eager at all?”

They all turned to look at Yuri then, and he felt himself color under the weight of their expectations.

“Why are you looking at me? I don’t know.” Yuri waved his hands in front of his face and Phichit laughed, breaking up the tiny bit of tension that had settled over their small group for a second.

“We’re looking at you because whatever it is you’re doing, it’s working. Prince Victor keeps looking over here and I don’t think he’s looking for any of us.” Phichit didn’t even look upset about it. “You can’t see it because your back is to him, so you’re going to have to take my word for it, but he totally is.”

“No, he isn’t.” Yuri shot back automatically. Phichit did have a point. Yuri had purposefully placed his chair in their circle so that his back was to the prince, so there really was no way for him to really know if Phichit was lying or not, but the denial was the quicker and easier way to go. “And even if he was, it doesn’t have to mean anything and it definitely doesn’t mean he couldn’t be looking at any of you, either.”

“You keep telling yourself whatever helps you sleep at night.” Phichit teased leaning over to bump his shoulder against Yuri’s. “Back to Guang Hong’s original question, though. Should we be acting more interested in wanting to spend time with him over there?”

“I’m pretty sure that I don’t want an elbow in my face.” Leo shot a pointed glance over at where Georgi and another dark-haired man named Kendry were bumping shoulders as they tried to get the attention of the attendant who was in charge of draping a light blue sash over the shoulder of whoever was next. “Although... If I can prove it wasn’t an accident, do you think I could get one of them sent home?”

“I wouldn’t try it.” Guang Hong tucked a strand of hair behind his ear and he looked over Yuri’s shoulder and towards all the commotion again. “Besides, those are the kind of men that will take themselves out of the picture soon enough. I know I haven’t spent much time with him, but Prince
Victor doesn’t seem to gravitate towards those who force themselves into the spotlight.”

“Agreed.” Phichit chirped happily. “He’s definitely more the type to be drawn towards those the spotlight rests naturally on instead.”

“What are you talking about? That doesn’t make any sense.” Leo poked Phichit in the side. “Elaborate, please.”

“Yuri knows what I’m talking about.”

“I assure you, I really don’t.” Yuri was frowning now, giving his full attention to Phichit and desperately trying to ignore some of the whispers that were starting to begin behind them as others began to notice their apparent disinterest in the proceedings. “Did you hit your head rolling out of bed this morning?”

“You’ll never get him to admit to anything, you know that, right?” Yuri almost jumped out of his chair as Chris’ smooth voice entered the conversation and the tall man drug a chair over to drape his large frame over right in between Phichit and Guang Hong. “I’m honestly starting to believe he has no idea he’s doing it at all.”

“Doing what? What do you think I’m doing?” Even though he wasn’t sure he really wanted the answer, Yuri couldn’t help but ask. His so-called friends were actually starting to frustrate him. “I can’t stop doing it if I don’t know what it is.”

“I don’t think anyone wants you to stop.” Chris grinned widely, showing a not insignificant amount of teeth. On anyone else, the grin would have looked feral. On Chris is just looked confident. “Let me amend that statement. I know for a fact there are several people who definitely don’t want you to stop.”

“None of you make any sense.” Yuri protests. “If you don’t want to explain yourself, can we at least talk about something else?”

“We can talk about something else.” Phichit is smiling in that way that Yuri understands to mean he’s being humored. “Oh! My hamsters got here last night! When we’re done here why don’t we go back to my room and you can all meet them?”
Phichit led the conversation from there, and if there was a niggling voice in the back of his head that kept telling Yuri he knew exactly what Chris had been talking about, he resolutely ignored it.

~

Yuri was the last one to be called to have his picture taken with the prince.

He kept his back to the production the entire time. Up until Chris was called and he realized it would be even more awkward for him to sit by himself and stare at the wall than it would be to turn around and watch as Victor and Chris were photographed in a number of poses.

As much as it irked him to admit it, Victor and Chris made a striking pair. They were roughly the same height, Chris maybe a few centimeters taller and both were broad-shouldered and slim-waisted. Even their coloring complemented each other, Chris’s skin just a few shades darker than the prince’s.

They were talking, too. Yuri couldn’t make out the words from his far away corner, but the tone was clearly light and they were both wearing easy smiles. Something dark and different twisted in Yuri’s chest as Chris said something and Victor chuckled softly, achingly close to the kind of laugh he used when he was with Yuri. The one that always made him think the prince wasn’t hiding anything from him.

The one that had Yuri calling him ‘Victor’ without ever thinking of the consequences because it was hard to think of him as anything other than that.

They were so close. Pressed together as they stood against the backdrop. Holding hands as they were directed to take a seat on an opulent chaise lounge with deep purple velvet cushions and golden trim. It all looked so simple. So natural.

Almost like Chris had been born to take that spot beside him.

Well, that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Chris was a good person. He was smart. He could be funny and insightful. He was polite, too. He would be perfect at state functions or even just sitting beside Victor every Friday on *The Report*.

Yuri could see how Chris might be someone who could be easy to love. Or, at the very least, someone that would make an excellent partner.
Then Chris is gone and an attendant is calling for Yuri to step forward to take his turn. His fingers ache and he looks down in surprise to find that he has his hands clenched into fists in his lap so hard that the knuckles are completely white. Yuri bites the inside of his cheek and forces himself to uncurl them as he rises to his feet.

“Hello, Yuri.” Victor holds out a hand to him as he steps up onto the slightly raised platform in front of the backdrop. For a moment, Yuri hesitates, but he’s able to hide it in the flurry of motion that is the attendant with the sash tossing the fabric over his head and causing him to take a step back in surprise.

Tension broken in that split second, they both laugh as Yuri stumbles and tries to stay on his feet. Victor’s arm reaches out lightning fast and grabs Yuri by the wrist, tugging him forward and supporting him with a quick hand to the small of his back.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Kastuki!” The attendant who caused the whole thing is wringing her hands as she rushes forward with some pins and quickly secures the sash into place. His is plain, but Victor’s has medals attached to it and there are golden bars across his shoulders with two gold braids loop around his right shoulder. “I thought I had your attention! Just… Here let me…”

“It’s fine, ma’am. It’s been a long day for all of us.” Yuri brushes her hands away and slides the last pin into place himself. He can still feel Victor’s grasp on his wrist, the warmth radiating from the palm against his back. “Don’t worry about it at all.”

“It seems that gravity tends to work a little too well whenever we’re together, doesn’t it?” And with that joke the last bit of darkness lifts from Yuri’s mind and he feels settled again. Victor releases his wrist and reaches out to brush back where some of his hair has once again escaped the gel’s valiant attempts to hold it back. “There. Perfect. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.” Yuri nods and this time he takes Victor’s hand and allows himself to be pulled closer to the prince’s side, turning his body so that his right shoulder fits parallel with Victor’s left. “Is this how they want us?”

“Yes. That’s actually pretty close to perfect.” The photographer is a small man, with squinty eyes and brown hair that is long and hangs limply around a pudgy face. His motions are smooth and precise though as he moves closer to them, and Yuri can tell he knows what he’s doing. “Your Highness, if you would just place your left hand on his waist and, Mr. Katsuki, please fold your hands right above the center of your hips… Yes. Like that. Your Highness, please place your right hand on top of Mr. Katsuki’s. There we go.”
“Is this alright?” Victor whispers into Yuri’s ear and it’s all he can do to nod, not trusting his voice as it feels as though there is something wedged in his throat.

“I’m going to take a bunch of pictures in rapid succession.” Pleased with the way they have been placed, the photographer steps back and takes the camera once of his assistants offers him. “Just actual natural. If you want to talk to each other, that’s fine. This doesn’t have to be quite so stiff and formal.”

“Okay, I think we can do that.” At Victor’s words Yuri tilts his face around and back so that he can look up at the prince behind him. “It has been a long day. This shouldn’t take too long.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve been sitting around for most of it. You’re the one that’s been on his feet almost the whole time.” This close, Yuri can now see faint lines of what might be exhaustion around Victor’s eyes and there is a sag to the set of his shoulders that wasn’t there when they’d begun immediately after lunch. “Do you need a break?”

“I would love one, but I’m afraid I’m on a rather tight schedule. Some of the photographs took longer than expected.” Victor grimaced before smoothing his face back out and grinning. “I almost wish you had been one of the earlier men. I’ve been trying to find time to talk to you for days now.”

“You have?” Yuri ignored the flashing of the camera in the background, vaguely aware some corner of his mind was still instructing his body to stay relaxed and a smile to stay on his face. “Why?”

“Do I have to have a reason to want to talk to you?” Victor asked, his thumb rubbing back and forth against the sensitive skin on the inside of Yuri’s left wrist. “Do you try to avoid having conversations with all your friends?”

“No. Just you.”

“Yuri! So cruel!” This time Victor wasn’t fooled at all by his teasing and something warm curled up at the base of Yuri’s spine that he instantly squashed down. No, this was not the time for old crushes to rise back up to the surface. “Thursday. I have the entire afternoon free. Let’s take Makkachin for a walk around the gardens together. There’s so much I want to talk to you about.”

“I’ll have to check my schedule, but I’m pretty sure I can squeeze you in.”
They had to pause the photo session for five minutes as they both devolved into laughter at that point.

The rest of the session ran smoothly and was over far too soon. Victor and Yuri had just stepped down off the platform and Yuri was about to scan the room to find the harried attendant from earlier in order to unpin and return his borrowed sash, when the door burst open and everyone present scurried out of the way in the face of King Yakov striding into the room and making a direct line right towards where Victor and Yuri were standing.

“Victor. Where have you been? I told you that you didn’t have time to play around today.” The king was short and gruff and Yuri hadn’t said even two words to him the entire time he’d been there, the other man constantly being in one meeting or another and spending most of his meals deep in conversation with either his wife or one of his sons, completely ignoring everyone else in the room. Even now, Yuri’s presence was only acknowledged by the curtest of nods. “When I agreed to go along with this exercise in utter frivolity, you promised me this would only take two hours. It’s been three!”

“I can’t control how long the photographer needed to get what the magazine was requesting.” Victor was no longer touching Yuri by this point, but he was still standing close. Only centimeters of space between them and Yuri shuffled closer still, some instinctive urge to stand by Victor’s side rearing up before he could stop it. He felt the cuffs of their jackets brush against each other and he could have sworn Victor’s eyes shifted over to him quickly before shifting back to where his father was fuming in front of them. “I do apologize for the inconvenience.”

“Bah. You apologize even when you do not mean it.” King Yakov waved a hand through the air as Victor opened his mouth to say something further. Victor’s mouth snapped shut at the gesture. “I understand this is important, but matters of state will not wait for you. We have much to prepare for if we wish to be ready to receive the retinue from Britannia at the end of the summer. Then you can spend time with your suitors.”

“It’s seems I’ve contributed to making you late again, Your Highness.” Yuri allowed the backs of their hands to brush against each other this time and Victor turned his head and smiled.

“No, I’m afraid I’ve made myself late this time. Quite on purpose, I might add.” Victor turned back to where the king was still silently fuming. “Father, I’m sure you recognize Yuri Katsuki.”

“Yes. The dancer.” Now the king was giving Yuri all the attention he had yet to give anyone else and Yuri struggled to stand tall under the intense scrutiny. “Would you mind if Victor got back to his work?”
Was that a trick question? Yuri wasn’t sure and he definitely didn’t know what the right answer could even be. He shrugged and directed his answer towards the prince instead.

“Prince Victor, I think you need to go.” He smiled to soften the blow from his words as Victor’s face instantly fell. “Thursday afternoon, remember? I’ll clear my schedule if you clear yours.”

“Consider it a date.” Yuri was sure Victor’s smile then would have been capable of melting an entire glacier into the sea in six seconds flat.

Before Yuri could realize what was happening, Victor had grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly. Almost as soon as the connection happened, it was over and Victor dropped his hand and allowed his father to usher him out the door while babbling happily about something he was sure had nothing to do with the meeting they were about to go to if the sour expression on King Yakov’s face was anything to go by.

Yuri stared after them long after they were gone. Until the attendant from earlier reappeared and began stuttering her own apologies and she took back the sash and showed him out of the room so that he wouldn’t be in the way as they tore down the backdrops and put away any props that had been left out.

He didn’t even know where to begin to parse through all the emotions that he’d felt during the day. They were all starting to bleed together into one big ball of tangled everything.

Yuri knew what he usually did when he felt like this. When his feelings rolled together into one monstrous entity, it always helped for him to spend time in a studio somewhere. As though the act of moving his body also moved his mind, untangling all those knotted threads until he could gain some desperately needed clarity.

Dancing was what he usually did, but even though his feet yearned to take him to the studio. Even though the key nestled in his nightstand burned even through two floors and several closed doors like a beacon, he didn’t heed the call.

He couldn’t. It was too soon.

Luckily dinner began not even an hour later and he could bury himself in his second option for comfort: Food.
He knew it was a temporary fix. A band-aid, but it was the best option he had.

For the first time since that first night in the palace, Yuri did not sleep well that night.

~

The next morning, the shit hit the fan and continued to roll downhill as the week progressed.

Yuri didn’t know how it had happened, but some of the pictures from the photo session had leaked and the magazine had scrambled to get their spread out before the whole country got their hands on the photographs anyways. By Monday afternoon, they had run a special edition online and had printed as many copies as they could, distributing them in a flurry so those who couldn’t afford computers or internet could get their hands on what everyone else was gossiping about.

For his part, Yuri avoided it. Mila had swept through the palace just before dinner and had managed to hunt down any copies that had somehow found their way in, although Yuri knew for a fact a few missed her multiple sweeps. He was sure if he tried hard enough he could find a maid or a guard that could provide him with a copy, but he didn’t.

Besides, he was sure that it would die down soon enough, as all potential scandals and gossip did.

On Tuesday, it just got worse.

It had started out as a normal day. Breakfast had been pleasant, the whole royal family had been present for the first time in a while and Victor had spent some time wandering from table to table after he’d finished his own food, touching base with everyone, which had put them all in a pleasant mood going into the etiquette lesson they were scheduled for that morning.

That was when it had fallen apart.

Yuri, Phichit, Chris, and Guang Hong were milling about in the main foyer killing some time before they were due to meet in one of the larger parlors for their lesson when their attention was drawn to the top of the stairs where a group of Selected were beginning to stream down the steps led by a man named Paxton who was being followed by three attendants and a load of baggage.
“What’s going on?” Chris asked as soon as the group pulls even with them. Paxton glaring at their small group as he goes, his irate gaze lingering long enough on Yuri that he feels the urge to turn around and run before the other man turns away and continues away.

JJ is the only one who notices the question, as the others are now pushing past them, intent on murmuring their own questions to Paxton’s back as he continues his stern march to the great double doors that will lead out to the main drive. JJ hangs back, waiting for the space to clear before stepping into their circle and turning his back to the whole production.

“Paxton’s being sent home.” Yuri had expected JJ to be smug about it. After all, that meant one less person to contend for Victor’s attention, something everyone has noticed JJ has been growing desperate to attain. But he doesn’t sound smug. He just sounds worried, and maybe even a bit sad. “He took it upon himself to seek out Prince Victor after breakfast and apparently harsh words were exchanged between himself and the prince. They’re all trying to figure out exactly what he said so they can avoid the same fate, but Paxton isn’t saying anything.”

“I’d bet money it had something to do with that magazine article.” Guang Hong stated softly and jumped as he found himself the focus of everyone’s attention. “I… I heard him talking with Kieran and Hayden yesterday evening. He wasn’t happy about being ranked twenty-fourth on the list.”

“That’s stupid.” Phichit crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “What the editors of some inane magazine think doesn’t make any difference.”

“Spoken like someone who was ranked eighth.” JJ risked a glance behind him before leaning in closer. “It matters to those who didn’t place high. It matters a lot. We’ve been here for a few weeks and the prince has only spent one on one time with a handful of us… Some of that handful even more than once… To the others it just… It matters.”

“Why are you worried?” Guang Hong asked. “You were ranked third. The only two higher than you were Chris and Yuri.”

“Me?” Everything was starting to make sense and Yuri was beginning to regret not at least taking a peek at the article. That news explained why he’d been getting more pointed looks and glares over the past day and a half at least. “That’s… I don’t…”

“Yuri, do you mind if we deal with your complete lack of awareness of how absolutely adorable you and the prince look together later?” Phichit pat Yuri soundly on the shoulder. “Thanks. As for the
other problem, maybe the prince just doesn’t want to talk about it at all? If we just avoid mentioning it we should be fine until this all blows over.”

“I agree with Phichit.” Chris didn’t seem worried about the recent development. Or, if he was, he wasn’t showing it. “It never hurts to take our cues from Prince Victor as he gives them. If the prince wants to talk about it or to hear our personal opinions, he’ll ask. Unless he does, we’d be better off keeping it to ourselves.”

The conversation ended then as the other Selected had come back from seeing Paxton off and they were swept into their etiquette class by Mila, who was looked more stressed than usual and not amenable at all to any more distractions or small talk.

On Wednesday, Yuri was iced out.

Well, not completely iced out. Phichit, Leo, Guang Hong, and Chris still spoke to him and sat with him at meals, but everyone else kept their distance.

Yuri didn’t know what to do. He was sure he could go to Victor if he really wanted to. If everyone was as scared as they said they were about accidentally upsetting the prince and causing their own dismissals, then Victor could be a help, but he didn’t want to have Victor fight his battles for him. Especially when he wasn’t even sure what battle it was he was supposed to be fighting.

By Thursday morning, he couldn’t stand it any longer.

He was exhausted since he was barely able to sleep. Minako was getting concerned, poking at him whenever he did show up in his room to try and catch a few minutes of sleep. Even with the support of his friends, he could feel the weight of eyes of him whenever he was at meals or during their classes or even when they were supposed to have spare time in the Entertaining Room. He hadn’t even been able to take Makkachin for a walk because every time he thought to seek out Victor’s attendant to request he bring the dog to Yuri, there was always someone that ended up following him.

Yuri tried hiding in the library, only to find that it was a far more popular spot than he’d known it to be before. Either that, or the group of five men that turned up five minutes after he’d settled down with a book had been there for a reason other than reading. From their less than subtle whisperings, Yuri figured that was probably the case.
He tried hiding in the kitchens, but he was escorted out fairly quickly when one of the chefs realized he was sneaking tarts meant for dessert that night.

In a fit of pure desperation, Yuri ran to his room, grabbing a bag stuffed with his work-out gear and his brace, and stuffing the key to the dance studio Victor had given him into his pocket.

Yuri snuck through some of the back hallways and cut through the garden to get to the studio in the hopes that he would lose anyone who might be trying to follow him by going that way. It seems to work as he reached his destination without running into anyone and he clicked the lock into place behind him, confident enough that there aren’t a high number of people who might possess a key.

It’s strange, being back in a space like this. Logically, Yuri knows it shouldn’t be. It wasn’t that long ago that he was in this very same room, but Victor had been with him then and he’d been wearing a suit.

Now there was no Victor to distract him. He was still in his slacks and pressed collared shirt, but he had the strap of his dance bag digging into his shoulder. He could change. He could do whatever he wanted.

He could dance.

His body wanted him to. Yuri had toed off his shoes in the entryway and his socks clung to the wood floor as he curled his toes against the firm surface. In the mirror he saw his own reflection. He looked pale and tired, but his back was straight and his shoulders square. He rocked up onto the balls of his feet and sank back down onto his heels again.

Well, it wouldn’t hurt to change clothes. Just in case.

There was a curtained area at the back of the room that had hooks on the walls and a low bench. Yuri shrugged out of his clothing and into a pair of leggings and a loose shirt. He sat on the bench and pulled his brace over his leggings, biting the inside of his cheek as he tightened the straps. The rasp of Velcro echoed through the empty space and Yuri removed his glasses and tucked them away safely in his bag.

He could stretch. Yes, that was something he should be doing. He would always take some time before turning in for the night to do some light stretching in his room, but it had been far too long since he had properly stretched out. Surely that wouldn’t hurt?
About halfway through, Yuri knew he’d made the right choice. His muscles were burning in a good way and his mind was starting to clear. He was on the floor now, legs spread into a split as he leant forward with his arms extended and chest pressed to the floor. He breathed in deeply and held the stretch, frowning as he rested his forehead against the cool wood flooring. His right knee was hovering above the floor, unable to get that last bit of stretch he desperately wanted with the restriction of the brace.

He was seconds away from sitting up and ripping it off in a fit of frustration when he heard the click of the lock from behind him and he looked up to see Yurio walking in, the teen pausing as he instantly noticed the room was occupied.

“Oh!” Yuri shot up and curled his legs underneath him. “Hello, Yurio.”

Yurio made a noise low in the back of his throat, but didn’t say anything as he closed the door behind him and flicked the lock back into place. Without his glasses, it was hard for him to make out the finer details of Yurio’s face, but he was fairly secure in his guess that the young prince was either scowling or something close to it.

The teenager stalked around the edges of the room and made his way to what Yuri was sure was some kind of supply closet. Yuri watched, brows furrowed in confusion as Yurio digs around in the closet, grunting as he finds what he’s looking for and turns around to face Yuri with equipment in his hands.

“Do you fence?”

The questions takes Yuri off guard and his mouth opens and closes twice before he can manage to put words together.

“Um… A little?” Yuri stumbles up to his feet, squinting a bit in order to better see what Yurio had stacked in his arms. Sure enough, there are two long, slender swords poking out from an armful of padding and other things one would need to fence in. “A few years ago a guest choreographer brought us a version of Romeo and Juliet reimagined as a ballet. He wanted the big sword fight to look real so most of the corps had to take some lessons so there was a lower chance of anyone accidentally poking someone else’s eye out in the middle of a performance.”

“That sounds stupid.” Yurio is looking at him in an odd way. Almost as though he has just been handed the piece to a puzzle Yuri can’t even see. “Are you any good?”
“I’m okay. I know which direction to shove the pointy end in any case.” As soon as the words had left his mouth, Yurio was shoving some padding and a blunted foil into his hands without any further preamble. “Oh, okay. We’re really doing this.”

“Of course we are. Unless you’re too scared.” Yurio is smirking now, the picture of someone who knows they had won before they’ve even begun. The expression stokes the competitive part of Yuri that usually lies dormant beneath the surface and he is quick to tug on the chest protector he’d been given.

“Just the chest?” Yuri asks as he tightens the straps and hefts the weight of the foil in his right hand, testing out his grip and the balance of the sword. It’s not entirely unfamiliar in his hand and Yuri falls into a half-remembered stance, body angled away from Yurio and feet spread evenly with his shoulders. “Shouldn’t we have masks, too?”

“As long as you don’t aim for my face, we’ll be fine. I hate those masks. Too hard to breathe.” Yurio tosses his foil from one and hand to the other and then back again, swiping the blade through the air in a test swing. “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’m ever going to be.” Yuri mutters, but he bends his knees and sets his feet, Yurio matching his stance from across the room and then they are off.

Yurio is good. Far better than Yuri is, but once Yuri shakes off the rust he’s able to at least keep up and not go down without a fight. He even manages to land a few hits and Yurio takes them with a surprising amount of grace.

They fall into an easy rhythm, lunging and parrying as their breaths begin to come quicker and Yuri can feel sweat dripping down from his hairline. They don’t say much other than Yurio occasionally yelling a correction that Yuri is quick to apply. In the place of words, the sounds of bare feet slapping against hardwood and the clash of metal on metal echoes through the room.

It’s a different kind of dance than Yuri is used to, but it is helping all the same. He can feel his mind clearing and his nerves settling even as his legs and back begin to burn under the strain. He’s spent too much time sitting around feeling sorry for himself and it’s starting to show in his lack of stamina and how they have to end their bouts long before either of them are ready.

“You aren’t fucking terrible.” Their last bout had ended in a draw with two touches each before Yuri had stepped back and held his hand up in surrender. He knew enough about his body by now to
recognize the sharp pain in his knee was only going to get worse from this point out. Yurio accepts the equipment Yuri hands him and makes his way to stow it back where it belongs. “Since you’ll probably be sticking around for a while, what do you think about coming here and helping me practice every so often? Usually I’d ask Victor or Beka, but they are both tied up with the royal visit at the end of the summer and… Why are you looking at me like that?”

It was like all the dark thoughts and emotions he’d been holding down for the past several days caught up to him at once and it was all Yuri could do not to just break down and cry. Since crying was not an option he was going to explore with Yurio in the room, his body merely trembled and he didn’t have to look in the mirror to know he was staring at the young prince with what he was sure was an interesting mix of frustration, anger, and just plain confusion.

“I-I’m sorry. I just…” Yuri knew he should hold his tongue. Even with all that had happened, he didn’t know Yurio, but he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t hold back now even if he wanted to. “I don’t think I’m going to be here for much longer is all. I don’t want to make a promise I can’t keep.”

“Are you blind or just fucking stupid?” Yurio has his arms crossed over his chest and his scowl is deeper than it usually is. Every instinct Yuri possesses is screaming at him to take a step back, but he rounds his shoulders and lifts his chin instead. “Because you would have to be a braindead moron if you haven’t realized by now that the only way my brother is going to let you go is if you dump his ass and beg to go home.”

“Maybe I do want to go home.” Yuri shot back. That part felt safe. The rest of what Yurio might have been implying was a can of worms Yuri wanted nothing to do with. “I’m no good at this. Everyone would be better off if I left.”

“Alright, so you are fucking stupid.” Yurio growled low in his throat as Yuri opened his mouth in a vain attempt to defend himself. “Who do you think would be better off if you left? Those other idiots vying for my brother’s useless hand? Because if so, you wouldn’t be wrong. With you gone, Victor would be forced to pick one of them and that works out just perfectly for their agendas.”

“Victor isn’t going to pick me anyway.” Yuri shot back. “We’re just friends. Why do I have to keep telling everyone that?”

“Because you’re literally the only person on the planet that believes it.” Yurio quirked an eyebrow. “Seriously. Haven’t you seen those photos in that magazine?”

“No.” Yuri shakes his head and moves to retrieve his bag from the corner he’d tossed it in. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do now that he had it. Yuri wanted to run, but Yurio had taken the
opportunity to place himself between Yuri and the exit. “I don’t want to see them.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t need to see Victor standing next to a bunch of different men to know that I don’t belong here.”

“Idiot.” Yurio shook his head and pointed at Yuri. “Stand right there. Don’t you dare move a fucking muscle. I will tackle you if I see you even glance towards that fucking door.”

“But…”

“You heard me. Don’t fucking move.” Yurio hurries over to a shelf along the back wall of the building and Yuri digs in his bag, pulling out his glasses and putting them back on his face so he can see clearly again. There is a muttering of curses as Yurio moves boxes and books aside before finding what he was looking for and letting out a quick yell of triumph. “Thank god it’s still here. That old hag has been relentless searching for these shitty things.”

“Here.” Yuri grabbed at the magazine that Yurio flung at him, barely managing to hang onto it and stop it from falling to the floor. “Look at it. All the way. To the very end. Once you’re done, if you can look me in the eye and tell me you still want to go home, I’ll go personally find my brother and drag him here so he can give you his royal permission to go back whatever boring fucking thing you were doing before coming here. Deal?”

Yuri didn’t want to agree, but Yurio’s stance was still fairly aggressive and Yuri was tired from lack of sleep and his recent exercise so he didn’t like his odds of making a break for it. He didn’t want to find out the hard way if Yurio was the kind to make good on his threat to tackle him. Yuri was sure he was.

Ignoring the cover, which was nothing more than a stock photo of Victor from a few years ago, he tentatively turned to the first page of the special edition.

The magazine started with the man they thought looked least compatible next to the prince and then went up from there. Yuri paused when he saw Paxton standing next to Victor underneath a golden ‘24’. They both looked tense and there was enough space between the two of them that you could have reasonably squeezed another human being between them if you had wanted to.
That was the common theme, Yuri noticed. As he turned the pages and got closer and closer to the number one spot, the physical distance between Victor and whoever he was standing with was slowly decreasing, but there was still an air of stiffness that no amount of photo editing could cover up. Half the time it looked as though Victor was paying more attention to something beyond the camera than the person at his side, though what that could have been, Yuri could even begin to guess.

Guang Hong had been number ten, the commentary mentioning superficial things such as the major height different between himself and the prince and how Guang Hong didn’t seem able or willing to look Victor in the eye in any of the photos they had chosen to run.

Nine was Leo, who looked happy to be there, if a little on the reserved sides. Both photos the magazine had chosen to run were of Victor and Leo sitting on the chaise lounge leaning against each other. They didn’t look too bad together, though Yuri had to admit that same prevailing stiffness that was in all the other shots was still there.

As the number eight spot, Phichit looked like his normal self. All smiles and enthusiasm even the still photograph couldn’t contain. Victor seemed fine. His smile was wide and polite and there was a shot of Phichit looking up at him that was the closest Yuri had seen so far of Victor maybe actually enjoying what was happening.

By the time he turned the pages and saw JJ on one side and Chris on the other, his hands were trembling so bad he was afraid he might rip the page. JJ looked flawless, as he always did, and Yuri could tell his confidence helped put Victor at ease more so than anyone so far. On the other side, Chris also look relaxed and calm, drawing Victor’s body language toward him even though that odd physical gap that had been present in so many of the earlier pictures was back. Even on paper Yuri had to admit both JJ and Chris looked radiant and prince-like hanging off Victor’s arm, no matter how much or little space was between their bodies.

Yuri paused. He knew from JJ’s comment on Tuesday that he had been either number one or two. He hadn’t realized until this very moment that he had instantly assumed he would have been number two and Chris would have been number one, but that wasn’t the case. It couldn’t be the case because Yuri was staring at the golden number ‘2’ right next to the scrolling text that read ‘Christophe Giacometti, Three’.

There was only one spot left. All Yuri had to do was turn the page and he would see himself.

Knowing it and seeing it were two completely different things. As soon as he’d flipped to the last page, he found himself blinking rapidly and struggling to pull in oxygen that didn’t feel like it was on fire into his lungs.
They had gone all out for the number one spot. His name was spelled in the same golden cursive script, but it was bolder and larger than the others had been, scrawling across the tops of both pages.

‘Yuri Katsuki, Five.’

And then there are the photos.

Oh, god. They look so happy together. There is no distance, no formality. Seeing them there, on the glossy pages of a magazine… It feels like someone has punched Yuri right in the gut, he almost doubles over from the phantom feeling.

Victor is smiling at him in every shot, eyes locked on Yuri, oblivious to whatever it was that kept catching his attention when he was with any of the others. Yuri is smiling back up at him, as though Victor is the only thing in the world he ever wants to look at. Even their bodies are in sync, not even a whisper of space between them and no formal stiffness to be found.

It’s a picture in the bottom righthand corner of the spread that catches his attention finally. It was a candid shot, not one he even remembers having taken. In it Victor and Yuri are standing side by side in front of the king. They look… United. Like they are discussing something much more important than Victor being late for some meeting.

Yuri is aware of Yurio staring at him with a smug grin on his face as Yuri carefully closes the magazine again. He is aware, but he doesn’t have any idea what to say in response. His mind is whirring so fast it’s making him dizzy.

As though sensing his internal struggle, Yurio breaks the silence.

“He looks at you like that all the time. It makes me want to throw up.” Yurio removed his arms from where they were crossed over his chest and placed them on his hips. “And you look at him the same damn way. So don’t try to lie to me and tell me you are ‘just friends’. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“I… I didn’t know.” It sounds like a lame excuse even to his own ears, but it’s the truth. The signs had all been there. Apparently written in some kind of language Yuri didn’t speak since he hadn’t been able to read them at all, but they had been there. “What am I going to do?”
“Fuck if I know.” Yurio shrugged. “Whatever you want. Hey, aren’t you supposed to be spending time with him after lunch?”

Yes, yes, Yuri was. As though on cue, the was the sound of a bell ringing in the distance, calling all those who were to eat in the dining hall to lunch.

He’s supposed to see Victor in an hour. They’re supposed to walk Makkachin through the gardens and talk.

He’s running out of time and Yurio’s helpfulness seems to have run out for the day because all he does is take the magazine from Yuri’s slack grip and sprints over to tuck it back into its hiding place.

He has one hour to figure out what he’s going to do. What he’s going to say. If he’s even going to say anything at all.

Yuri had never been more terrified by the thought of a conversation before in his entire life.
Chapter Eight – Fluctuation

Yuri barely had enough time to properly panic about his recent revelations before he had to hurry back to his room and change for lunch. Even Minako noticed his distraction and the way his hands were shaking, but she didn’t say anything, rightly recognizing Yuri’s desire to mentally stew on his own.

The meal passed by in a blur, Yuri being far too distracted to pay attention to anything other than shoving food into his face at a rate that quickly discouraged anyone from trying to begin a conversation with him. He was glad for it, too. In his fragile mental state he was sure that he would have done something absolutely stupid like drop to his knees and beg his friends to tell him what to do.

Victor wasn’t at lunch, but Yuri hadn’t been expecting him to be. He was already rearranging most of his regularly scheduled afternoon to go on his date with Yuri, after all.

And, holy shit, it really was a date, wasn’t it?
There was no more denying it. The pictures didn’t lie. For some insane reason, Crown Prince Victor Nikiforov liked him. Perhaps even as more than a friend. Perhaps even as someone who he would want to stand by his side for the rest of their lives.

Yuri would be lying if he said there wasn’t a tiny part of him that desperately wanted that, too. Even as the larger part of him tried to stomp that bit out under a tirade of harsh logic and blind panic.

He wanted to run. It was a habit by this point. Whenever Yuri felt unsure or trapped, his entire body practically vibrated with the need to put physical distance between himself and the problem. But there was nowhere to run here. Nowhere that someone wouldn’t eventually find him and he did not like his odds of making a break for the main gates and fleeing into the countryside surrounding the capital city. Even if he was certain Victor wouldn’t actually have him arrested and tried for treason, Yuri was sure that path would still not end well for him.

In lieu of being able to run like that animal part of him required, he ended up wandering the halls aimlessly instead.

He knew he didn’t have a lot of time. He should probably find his way back to his room and change out of the jeans and black button up he was wearing into something that was more appropriate for spending time with the prince, but he avoided that wing of the palace entirely. There were too many prying eyes that way.

Too many people that were waiting for him to fail so they could pounce on the gap he would leave behind.

It was too much pressure, so Yuri did what he did best and avoided it completely.

Yuri couldn’t avoid it forever, though, and he wouldn’t be able to avoid the prince either, even if he could think up an excuse to reschedule their time together this afternoon. As tempting as that option was, there wasn’t a thing he could think of that wouldn’t either hurt Victor’s feelings or leave him feeling concerned for Yuri’s wellbeing. No, the time had come for him to face whatever this was head on whether he wanted to or not.

If only he could figure out exactly what to say.

The palace was bigger on the inside than it looked from the outside, and it didn’t exactly look small in the first place. There were tons of twisting hidden corridors, probably meant for servants to run
from one end to the other without being noticed. Yuri was more or less sure of where he was, and he knew if he could find his way outside he could easily get back to a part of the palace that was more familiar to him, but right now being lost suited his needs perfectly.

He knew he was running out of time. He had roughly twenty minutes or so before he was supposed to meet Victor.

Yuri sighed and turned around. He could walk for days and still not be able to make any sense out of the steady stream of thoughts and emotions that had wrapped around him like a cloak as soon as he’d seen the pictures. It was time to go back.

He turned another corner and paused, catching sight of a massive portrait on the wall that was placed prominently in the empty space, though why it would be here in an area of the palace that was clearly not used often, Yuri couldn’t understand.

It was a portrait of the royal family. An older one. From the looks of it, Victor was maybe five or six, still round in the face with baby fat and with silver hair that was about shoulder length, the ghost of the long hair he would wear as a teenager before cutting it off when he turned twenty. He was wedged between his parents, King Yakov with a full head of hair and maybe six centimeters taller than he looked now, bowed down under the dual forces of stress and age.

It was Victor’s mother that drew Yuri’s attention, however.

Yuri had been young when she passed, only five if he remembered correctly, probably not much older than the Victor in this portrait. He barely remembered much other than that the adults had seemed very sad and the whole country had worn black for a week straight. It hadn’t been until he was older that he’d truly understood why.

She looked exactly how he remembered, though. Exactly like Victor.

Tall and slender with pale skin and those same twinkling blue eyes her son had inherited. Her hair was down past her waist and was the same ethereal silver. Even the brushstrokes of the painting couldn’t hide the slight upward quirk of her lips. The sheen of her hair or the sparkle in her eyes.

“She was beautiful, wasn’t she?”
Yuri just about jumped out of his skin, yelping and spinning around to find that Victor was leaning against an open doorway behind him with an inscrutable look on his face.

“V-Victor!” Yuri could feel his face heating and he shuffled nervously on his feet as he tried to calm the frantic rhythm of his heart. “S-Sorry. I didn’t see you there!”

“I didn’t think you had.” Victor stated plainly as he pushed off the doorframe and straightened up, taking a few steps toward Yuri before pausing again and looking past him, attention focused on the portrait on the wall. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I should be the one apologizing.”

“What for?” And now Yuri was confused again. He seemed to be confused more often than not these days. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I startled you.” Victor shrugged, still more focused on the portrait on the wall than the man right in front of him. Yuri turned again, staring back up at the painting, silent for a long moment before Victor spoke again. “I barely knew her, but I miss her. Sometimes I come here in the hopes that she might have something to say. Some advice to give that I can’t get anywhere else. She never does say anything, but saying whatever is bothering me out loud helps.”

“Even though she can’t answer me, one day I hope there might be someone I can turn to who will.”

Yuri doesn’t say anything. He just lets Victor’s words settle over him. Lets them land on his skin and burrow in deep through his tissue and into his bone. Yuri lets them circulate through his bloodstream, embed themselves into every sinew in his body and carve out a place deep in his heart.

“It gets lonely.” Yuri hasn’t asked a question, and so Victor doesn’t answer. They just let the statement hang in the air between them as Yuri takes a deep breath and tries to sort out what he wants to say next. “I never… I never thought about it much, but it does, doesn’t it? Get lonely.”

“All the damn time.” This time Yuri was sure he wasn’t imagining it. Victor didn’t just look tired. He sounded exhausted, too. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be burdening you with this. It’s just… You’re so easy to talk to that I forget I’m supposed to be trying impress you instead of depress you.”

“We should stop apologizing all the time. Especially since it seems like neither one of us ever think it’s necessary.” Yuri bit at his bottom lip and tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. He didn’t turn around, but he could feel the weight of Victor’s stare heavy on his back. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but… Is that why you decided to have your Selection?”
“Yes.” There was no hesitation at all in Victor’s response. Yuri itched to turn around, but he refrained. This was somehow so much easier when the only version of Victor’s face Yuri could see was his six year old self rendered in oils. “I couldn’t put it off forever, even if I wanted to, but now… Now felt right. Father is slowly handing over more and more responsibilities. I can’t do it alone. I need… Well, I need a partner. Someone I can build a foundation with. A friend.”

“A friend?” Yuri wanted to shift his weight back and forth so badly, but he didn’t. He felt locked into place, as though even the smallest of movements could break the spell of the moment and thrust them back into the world where Victor pretended that everything was fine all the time. “Not a lover?”

“I’ll settle for a friend.” Yuri heard Victor take a few steps forward, the carpet underfoot muffling the sound of the steps. He couldn’t have been more than a meter or two away now.

“Yuri, I don’t have any illusions about what this whole thing really is. It’s all one big show, but it’s better than the alternative. I’ll take some kind of choice over having my spouse determined for me based on proper breeding or family connections or if he happens to be the second prince of an ally nation.” Victor let out a soft sigh. “There are different kinds of love, after all. My mother… I know she loved my father in her own way and he loved her, too. It might not have been love at first sight or a whirlwind romance, but it was solid and steady. A partnership.”

Yuri nodded slowly. “I understand.”

And he did understand. For the first time since his mother had placed the letter into his hands over a month ago, he could see exactly what Victor was saying. What he was saying, what he wasn’t saying, and everything in between.

“I hoped you would.”

Yuri can feel him. Victor was so close Yuri could swear he could feel the heat radiating off his body and through the thin material of Yuri’s shirt. It wouldn’t take much. A half step back and Yuri’s back would be pressed against Victor’s chest. Close enough to feel the other man’s heartbeat.

He wished he could. He wished he could be that kind of person would just take a leap of faith. Let his body decide for him which path to take. Unfortunately, Yuri needed words. Even though he was usually the worst when it came to finding them, he needed them none the less.
“Victor… We should talk.”

They need to talk. Yuri has so much he needs to say. So much he needs to get off his chest, but he doesn’t get the chance as there is a tinny beeping noise emanating from his right wrist and they both jump apart at the sound as though it had been deafening instead of barely audible.

“What’s that?” Yuri finally turns around as Victor speaks, the distance between them feeling like an entire chasm instead of half the width of a hallway.

“My alarm.” Yuri fumbles with the watch on his wrist, fingers thick and clumsy and incapable of hitting the right button for ten seconds longer than shutting off an alarm should really take. “I’m supposed to be meeting someone by the glass doors leading out to the gardens. I didn’t want to be late.”

“We definitely wouldn’t want you to be late.” Victor grins and Yuri can fucking see that mask slipping back into place. It’s enough to make him want to find a way to claw it off. “That’s funny. I’m supposed to be meeting someone, too. Although, he’s probably expecting me to be late by now. It’s a bad habit of mine.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind so long as you bring your wonderfully adorable dog with you.” Yuri desperately wants to bring them back to where they were before, but he can tell the moment is gone. The moment is gone now, but they had an entire afternoon ahead of them. Maybe he can get it back.

“If you keep saying things like that I really am going to starting thinking you only like me for my dog.” Victor winks and Yuri valiantly tries to battle back the blush he feels creeping across his face. He fails, as he always does, but Victor smile quirks a bit at the edges and he can’t feel too upset when Victor looks at him like that. When Victor lets his mask slip even by the most infinitesimal of margins. “I’ll go get Makka?”

“I’ll be waiting patiently for you to arrive two minutes late.” Yuri smiled back.

“Perfect. By the glass doors?”

“I’ll be there.”
Victor was closer to five minutes late than two, but Yuri didn’t mind. It had given him more time to try to sort through his murky thoughts and try to pull them into something that had some semblance of order. He felt like he wouldn't have been able to fully accomplish that goal even if he’d had a million minutes, but the extra time did help some.

“Sorry for the delay. Makkachin decided to hide his leash under the bed this morning. It took me a few minutes to find it.” Victor held up the red leash in his hands as though to present it as evidence.

“I’m sure he had his reasons.” Yuri bent down and gave the poodle a firm scratch behind the ears, having to dodge quickly to avoid where Makkachin tried to lick his chin in thanks. “Were you trying to make Victor late, Makka?”

“I’m sure he was. I probably deserve it for something or another.” As Yuri straightened, he noticed Victor was beaming, the previous tension that had been between them completely gone for the moment. “Shall we?”

Yuri nodded and opened the doors, stepping aside so Victor could unclip Makkachin’s leash and allow the dog to bolt out the door.

“He looks happy to be out.” Yuri commented as they stepped out into the garden space and Victor closed the doors behind them.

“I’m sure he is.” Victor agreed amiably. “He might be getting older, but I think he’ll always be up for a good run through the grass.”

“My dog was like that, too.” Yuri said the words without thinking. Without even realizing what he was so precariously close to admitting. “We never had much time, but there was a park by my house that had a fenced in area where you could let your dog off the leash and he loved it when I would take him there.”

“You had a dog?” They had made it several steps off the path and out onto the grass in the direction Makkachin had run off in, but Victor paused now, looking down at Yuri in excitement. “You never told me you had a dog!”
“Oh? I didn’t?” Yuri laughed nervously. “Well, I did. We got him when I was twelve.”

“So ten years ago. That’s around the same time I got Makka! What kind of dog?” It was as though all the weariness, all the stiffness Victor carried himself with melted away. He looked excited. Like he was a child again instead of a twenty-four year old prince with the weight of the world resting on top of him.

“He was… Um… That is…” Yuri wanted to lie, or, barring that, at least skirt the truth, but he found he couldn’t. Not when Victor was looking at him like that. Besides, he had resolved to tell Victor the truth today. He shouldn’t be picking and choosing which truths to give. “He was a poodle. Smaller than Makka. A toy poodle… We… We didn’t have much space, so a bigger dog was out of the question.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” Victor had started walking again and Yuri followed his lead, noticing there was an extra spring to the prince’s step that had been missing before. “We can send for him if you’d like. I’m sure Makkachin would love a friend to play with.”

“I-I don’t have him anymore.” It had been so long that the pain from that loss was numb now, it only gave a slight throb when poked. But that was still enough to have Yuri swallow against a lump that had appeared in his throat. “We didn’t have the money to buy a puppy from a breeder, but they had a poodle turned into the pound that summer. He was already old when we got him. He passed right before I was accepted into the National Ballet. Old age. In his sleep. The vet said it was painless.”

“Oh… Oh, Yuri.” Victor looked distraught now. “I didn’t mean… I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“I understand... I-I don’t know what I would do if I lost Makkachin.” He noticed a shudder pass through Victor as though the very thought was almost more than he could bear. Yuri squeezed his hand again, grinning softly as Victor squeezed back. With a subtle shake of his head, Victor seemed to come back to himself. “Vicchan? That’s an interesting name.”
“Yes… It’s... My grandmother on my mother’s side was an immigrant from the part of New Asia that used to be Japan. She taught us about things like honorifics. I just thought… I thought it’d be cute. Makkachin is an interesting name, too.”

Yuri might have been determined to give Victor the truth, but that didn’t mean he had to admit that Vicchan was actually short for Victor. That was too much truth for one day.

“You’re right.” Victor tapped the index finger of his free hand against his lips. “I’m not actually sure where I got the name from. I wanted something unique. Something that suited him. To be honest, I think I just threw a whole bunch of random letter combinations down on a piece of paper and… Well, Makkachin is what came out.”

“I like it.” They exchanged grins and continued to walk.

Victor didn’t drop his hand and Yuri didn’t pull away either.

They had gone a lot further into garden than they had before by now. The willow trees were far behind them and they were now walking along a gravel path that had canopies of ivy every five meters or so along the way. Makkachin had returned to their sides and was trotting along in the grass, periodically jumping off after a bug or squirrel, only to return as soon as whatever caused the movement was gone.

“Victor, I...”

“Sh. Not here.” Victor looked over his shoulder and Yuri did the same, not seeing anything obvious, but trusting Victor none the less. “There’s a place I know. Somewhere we won’t be interrupted. It’s not far. If you’d like, we can talk there.”

“Okay.” Yuri was quick to agree and Victor whistled in order to bring Makkachin back to them. “Where are we going? Can you tell me that? Or is the garden bugged?”

“It would be incredibly difficult to bug a space as large as this, so I think we’re safe.” Victor chuckled deep in his throat. “There’s just a place I’d like to show you. Somewhere important to me. Then… Then we can talk.”

This time Yuri didn’t speak. He simply nodded and allowed Victor to take the lead.
It wasn’t too much further down the path before Victor was tugging him gently on the hand and pulling him away from the crushed gravel. They were in a section now that was filled with rose bushes. Yuri let the fingers of his free hand trail along the colored petals, being careful so as not to catch his skin against any of the thorns.

“I love roses.” It was too quiet. Yuri usually enjoyed silence, but now it felt oppressive. Full of something he couldn’t quite grasp. It was suffocating, and so he said the first thing that came to his mind. “It’s cliché, I know, but I really do. I mean, not really red roses per se. The different ones. Like… Like this one. May I?”

Victor raised an eyebrow but paused and nodded, watching carefully as Yuri reached out and plucked a blooming rose that was yellow in the center and turned into a dusky orange around the edges. Yuri held it up in front of them, gingerly gripping the stem as he rolled it back and forth so the petals caught the weak light filtering in through the trees above them.

“It’s called a flame rose.” Yuri brought the flower close to his face and inhaled its scent for a moment before holding it back out again. Victor bent over and did the same, letting go of Yuri’s hand for the first time to reach out and grab it, taking his turn to hold it up into the light in order to get a better look. “I had an instructor at the ballet that loved roses. She kept a garden out behind the dorms. We were banned from going there, but every so often she would cut some and leave bouquets around the studio. Not everyone liked them, but I always loved it when spring rolled around. She’d tell me their names sometimes, when I asked. I liked to think she was happy to have someone around who loved them, too.”

“It’s gorgeous.” Victor was cradling the blossom in his hand now as though it was the most fragile thing he’d ever held. “Did you…? Can I keep it?”

“It’s technically your rose.” Yuri pointed out, but when Victor frowned he let out a tight sigh. “Please, keep it. I think it suits you.”

“Really?” Victor picked the thorns from the stem carefully before tucking the rose into the lapel of his lightweight blazer. “What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know.” Yuri adjusted his glasses and shifted his weight back and forth, struggling to come up with words to describe the light feeling that had rushed over him as soon as he’d seen Victor holding the flower in the air. “The colors, I guess… Or their duality, really. How on the outside it’s dark and solid and calming, but inside… Inside it’s bright. You can see the flashes of yellow from the outside, but you don’t really notice until you peel back the orange and look into the core.”
“Yuri…” Victor sounded out of breath now, and Yuri felt his cheeks heat. “Yuri, I…”

“This isn’t where you wanted to take me, right?” He cut Victor off quickly. Yuri wasn’t sure he would have been able to stand what the other man had been about to say. Victor only shook his head in response. “Please. I’d like to see it.”

“Of course.”

It wasn’t too much further before Victor motioned for him to duck under a low hanging branch with vines draping off of it. They were so long they brushed against the ground in order to create a curtain of sorts and Makkachin barked in delight as he ran back and forth under them, wagging his tail before bounding off ahead again.

They were in a small open space with a fountain sitting in the middle. The fountain was old, a pair of cherubs sitting at the feet of a robed goddess Yuri was sure was supposed to represent Aphrodite. There was some green water in the stone basin surrounding the figures, but no water flowed from the shell Aphrodite had cradled in her arms. There was a thin layer of moss coating the cherubs and there were chips and cracks in the marble that made up the goddess’ hair and robes.

At the base of the fountain was a stone bench, also showing signs of wear and far too long in the elements without proper care, but it seemed solid and Victor was quick to take up a seat, patting the stone next to him as a sign for Yuri to settle there at his side.

As soon as he sat, another silence descended upon them.

It wasn’t until Makkachin settled at their feet, done sniffing around the bushes for the time being, before Yuri gathered together the courage to say something.

“It’s peaceful here.”

“Yes, it is.” Victor took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, resting his hands behind himself on the bench and leaning back to rest his weight on his palms. “No one ever comes here. I don’t even think the gardeners really know it’s here. I found it when I was playing hide and seek with my nanny one summer. Ever since then, I’d sneak out here whenever I needed time alone with no interruptions.”
“Thank you.” Yuri whispered reverently, immediately understanding the importance of Victor bringing him here.

“You wanted to talk?” Victor’s tone was light, as it always was, but Yuri could hear an undercurrent to it. Something dark and dangerous. Something that sounded like disappointment and hurt.

“I did.” Yuri confirmed, chewing on the inside of his cheek for a moment and curling and uncurling where his hands were resting in his lap. “I… I don’t know how to say this…”

“You want to go home?” This time Victor didn’t even try to hide it. Yuri felt a sharp, stabbing pain underneath his ribs right where his heart lay. Victor looked worse than hurt. He looked devastated.

“No!” Yuri was sitting bolt upright, eyes wide. He reached his hands out and grabbed Victor’s in his own. “That’s not what I’m trying to say at all! The last thing I want to do is go home.”

“It’s not?” Victor looked like he wanted to believe Yuri. There was no mistaking the glean of hope in his blue eyes, but that hope was a guarded thing. “I just… I thought…”

“Well, you thought wrong.” Yuri looked Victor in the eye then. Held his gaze and refused to look away, even as the anxiety that always lingered in the background flared to life at the edges of his consciousness. “I don’t want to go anywhere. I want to stay here. I know… I know you said you were looking for someone who could be your friend, and I want that, too. I just… I think I might want more than that also, and I think… I think you might want more than that, too.”

“You’re serious?” Victor turned his hands over so that he could grip Yuri’s in return. They were both angled towards each other now, so close their knees were touching. “You aren’t saying that because you think you need to? Because you think it’s what I want to hear?”

“When have you ever known me to say something just because it’s what I think you might want to hear?” Yuri scoffed automatically. “I have a terrible brain to mouth filter whenever you’re around. But, yes, I’m serious. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I get anxious sometimes. I like you, Victor, I like you a lot. More than I probably should, but that doesn’t mean I’m the perfect choice for you. There’s… There’s a lot that goes into being the kind of person you deserve to stand by your side.”

“It’s not so bad. I could help you. Teach you.” Victor tugged his right hand out of Yuri’s death grip and reached up to rub his thumb gently against Yuri’s cheek. “I’ve been doing it my whole life. Surely I’ve picked up something helpful along the way.”
“I don’t doubt that.” Yuri grinned, leaning into Victor’s touch. “Please don’t get your heart set on me just yet. If there is someone else that would be a better match, someone that could support you in a way I can’t… I don’t want to be the reason you would pass that person up.”

“I promise.” Victor’s face was so closer now. Impossibly close. “If you’ll promise me something in return.”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you won’t give up. That you’ll at least come talk to me if things are getting difficult to handle.” With Victor’s thumb still moving in soothing circles against the skin of his cheek, it was hard to focus but Yuri swallowed and nodded. Victor breathed out a sigh of relief. “Okay... Okay.”

“I’m not going to give up.” Yuri shifted forward, trying to get even closer.

“Thank you.”

As Victor whispered those last words, his closed the gap between them and Yuri felt the warm press of the other man’s lips against his own.

Yuri’s eyes fluttered shut as he pressed back. Victor’s hand traced along his jaw and cupped the back of Yuri’s head as their lips worked against each other, trying to find the perfect rhythm.

It felt like an eternity before they came up for air, and, even then, they didn’t move far apart. Instead, they rested their foreheads together, breaths mingling in the space between them.

“Please stay, Yuri. Please.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I promise.”
A massive and heartfelt thank you to literally everyone who has read this story, left a comment, a kudo, or referred this fic to a friend. I don't even have the words to express how much I love each and every one of you!

Please enjoy this new chapter!

As Yuri settled into a routine over the next few weeks, he kept the kiss he shared with Victor close to his chest. It was their secret, something for Yuri to pull out and dust off in the dead of night when his nerves or his knee wouldn't let him sleep. He would touch the tips of his fingers to his lips and remember how it felt to have Victor’s there instead and it would soothe him enough to rest.

The first few days after, Yuri had been a nervous wreck. He’d been convinced that all the others had to do was take one look at him and they would just know.

Logically, he knew they didn’t. They had no way to know unless he told them. If they even noticed he was more of a stuttering blushing mess than usual, no one remarked on it.

Although, to be fair, no one remarked on much of anything to his face at that time. If they weren’t whispering about him behind his back, they didn’t have much else to say.

Yuri tried not to let it get to him as it had before. He had his friends. Phichit, Chris, Leo, and Guang Hong were always quick to keep him company and Victor was more present at mealtimes and during the day. Just having the prince’s presence in the room or knowing he was in a parlor down the hall helped.

Knowing that Yuri could come to him whenever he needed and Victor would make the time to see him if need be, boosted his confidence. He never got to the point where he felt like he needed to ask for it, but it was comforting to know Victor was there. That Victor was there for him in a way he wasn’t for anyone else.
Thinking about it still put an extra spring in his step as he made his way into the Entertaining Room even two weeks later.

“Where have you been?” Phichit asked as Yuri took up his familiar seat at their usual table.

“The doctor.” Yuri sighed as he stretched his leg out underneath in front of him. “He wanted to do a follow-up on my knee since he gave me permission to start doing a few more strenuous exercises without the brace. Wanted to make sure it everything is still healing properly. Why? Did I miss something.”

“Victor sent Alexei home about half an hour ago.” Chris was sprawled in his own chair, idly flipping through a fashion magazine. Yuri had noticed that most of his friends were all dropping the title from Victor’s name now. Whether or not it was them following his own example or if Victor had told them to do so, Yuri didn’t know. He hadn’t gotten the courage to ask. “That makes seven to go home in the past three weeks, Paxton included.”

“Nineteen left.” Leo stated. “Chris was just saying he thinks the prince is trying to whittle us down to the Elite before they begin the preparations for the royal family of Britannia to come for their annual visit at the end of the summer.”

“It makes sense. Once we hit the top ten they’ll start training us on how to actually be the Royal Consort instead of how to fold our napkins in our laps properly.” Chris looked up from his magazine as he spoke, green eyes zeroing in on Yuri in a way that made him want to squirm. “It’ll be a good way to try out the suit and see if it fits before we end up having to purchase it, yes?”

“Anything has to be more fun than etiquette lessons.” Phichit groaned and he slumped over on the table. “If I have to sit through another lecture on proper posture, I’m going to scream.”

Guang Hong said something then, but Yuri wasn’t paying attention. Chris was still looking at him from across the table, eyebrow raised and a smirk on his lips. Almost as though he was trying to communicate something to Yuri that only he would understand.

Yuri frowned, trying to ask without words what Chris was looking at. The other man shrugged, grinned, and picked his magazine back up without saying a thing.

Odd.
“Yuri.” Phichit tugging on his sleeve pulled him out of his confused thoughts. “Has the prince said anything to you about why he sent any of them home?”

“Why do you think he’d tell me that?” And Yuri was frowning again, this time at Phichit.

“Look at it from our point of view.” Guang Hong said softly. “Victor goes on a date with someone else, and they are usually gone within a few hours. Victor goes on a date with you… Well, you’re still here.”

“He’d been on two dates with you and you’re still here.” Yuri shot back. This subject was never high on his list of things to want to talk about. For the most part his friends had backed off, but it seemed as though whatever it was that had them censoring themselves around Yuri had worn off at last. “The only person who knows why Victor does the things he does, is Victor. You should ask him if you are concerned.”

“So the subject’s in a mood.” Phichit whistled low under his breath, but then he was laughing and sitting up so that he could sling an arm around Yuri’s shoulder. “Oh! I get it! You don’t need to be jealous, Yuri! It’s pretty obvious you’re making it to the Elite.”

“W-What? Jealous? No!” Yuri tried to shove Phichit off him, but the other man didn't budge. He was surprisingly strong even with his slender arms and when Phichit wanted to cling to something, not even a crowbar and elbow grease could peel him off, so Yuri let him stay. “I’m not jealous. I’m just… It’s complicated.”

“That’s the understatement of the century.” Chris barks out a laugh and some of the awkward tension releases. “Have they invented a word that is like five levels above ‘complicated’? Because if they haven’t, I’m sure we could put our heads together and come up with one at this point.”

“I’ve always been fond of ‘byzantine’.” Guang Hong grins. “You don’t hear that one too often.”

“I like it. I think it suits the situation perfectly.” Phichit had moved on to rocking both himself and Yuri back and forth. Yuri supposed he could be irritated about it if he really wanted to be, but he wasn’t. It was hard to remember sometimes that he wasn’t the only one in this situation. Not the only one that was far from home and in over his head. “Oh! Yuri! You missed something else while you were gone.”

“I did?” Yuri sighs as Phichit does nothing more than nod his head, rubbing his cheek against Yuri’s shoulder in the process. “Are you going to tell me what that thing was? Or did you want me to try to guess?”
“It’s something you’ll like!” Phichit chirped happily, still not releasing Yuri quite yet, but loosening his hold so that Yuri could escape if he wanted to. They had all learned early on that Phichit was a tactile person and sometimes felt the urge to latch onto the nearest warm body. For the most part he respected Yuri’s desire for personal space, but every so often Yuri would give in and allow himself to be hugged. “We’re going to be taking dancing lessons starting tomorrow!”

“Really?” Yuri forced himself to stay as relaxed as possibly, not wanting to give anything away.

“Ballroom dancing to be precise.” Leo provided this answer. “There’s supposed to be a huge ball to welcome the royal retinue from Britannia at the end of the summer.”

“It’s only the end of May. That’s still months away.” Finally starting to feel that slight buzz under his skin from prolonged contact with his friend, Yuri pried Phichit’s arms off of him.

“Apparently, some of us don’t have years of a dance background to keep us afloat. We might need the extra practice time.” Chris is looking at Yuri again in that way that makes his skin crawl. As though the other man knows the answer to a question that hasn’t even been asked yet. “It’ll be more entertaining than our usual lessons. I’m looking forward to it if only for that.”

“Will you help us, Yuri?” Leo asked. He looked nervous. Fidgeting with the ends of his hair with one hand and tapping the index finger of his other against the table. “If we’re still here by the time the ball rolls around, there are going to be cameras on us again. We… Well, we don’t want to look like idiots.”

“Of course, I’ll help you.” He didn’t even have to think twice. Yuri might have been avoiding dancing ballet, but this wasn’t that and his friends had been there to pick him up more times than he could count even when they hadn’t realized they were doing it. This was the least he could do to repay their kindness. “Let’s see how the first lesson goes, but if we need the extra practice, I think I know a place we can go.”

Yuri was sure Victor wouldn’t mind if he brought the others to the studio to help them learn to waltz. Yurio might, the other boy had continued to meet Yuri twice a week to spar with the foils and Yuri had even shown him a few stretches at the barre to help maintain the teen’s flexibility and give him an extra edge with the way he could twist his body to avoid any touches. Yuri would have to talk to him and sort out some kind of schedule.

“You’re the best!” In lieu of giving Yuri another hug like he knew the other man wanted, Phichit just
clapped his hands. “This is going to be so much fun! It’s been so dull around here.”

The others began to chatter excitedly over his head. Yuri interjected when appropriate and eventually their good mood flowed into his own and he felt himself getting excited despite his anxiety trying to force him to go over all the things that could go wrong in an open dance practice.

By the time he received a note from the prince to ask if Yuri would be free to meet with Victor after dinner, Yuri was feeling excited, too.

He folded the note carefully and placed it in the drawer in his bedside table along with all the other notes Victor had sent to him over the past few weeks. All the invitations to more walks in the garden, or a quick word in the library or on the roof. A few that didn’t say much of anything at all, just that Victor was thinking of him and wanted to let him know.

Yuri hummed to himself as he helped Minako put away a fresh batch of laundry.

He couldn’t wait to see Victor. Evening couldn’t come quick enough.

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“Dance lessons? Well, that explains Lilia’s good mood this week.”

There was a spot on the roof that Victor had shown Yuri after their day in the garden. It was an open space tucked away between two gables with a knee high concrete wall surrounding it. It wasn’t a large space, but it was a good place for Yuri to go when he wanted a breath of fresh air in the middle of the night without having to worry about shoving past the guards stationed at the doors downstairs. If Yuri laid out flat on his back or curled up in the right way, no one would be able to see him from the ground.

There were up there now, sprawled out on their backs on a thick blanket and staring up at the ever darkening sky. They were lying head to head. All Yuri would have to do was let gravity do it job and pull his head down to the left and he would be able to see Victor’s profile, silver hair splayed out around him and eyes fixed on the stars above.

“Queen Lilia will be teaching us?” Yuri asked. He hadn’t spared much thought for who would be their instructor, but that made sense.
“I’m sure she will be.” Victor responded. “She taught Yurio how to ballroom dance. I think she enjoyed it. Somehow… He wasn’t exactly the most willing of students.”

“I can see that.” Yuri chuckled lightly, hoping that laughing would help hide the sudden flutter of butterflies in his stomach at the thought of having Queen Lilia judge him on his, probably incredibly rusty by this point, skills. “Do you think she really misses it that much?”

“Do you?”

Now, there was a loaded question. “Sometimes… I mean… Almost every day.”

“Would you go back if you could?” Yuri could hear Victor shifting on the blanket as he asked the question. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Victor was now curled on his side, watching Yuri’s face. “If the director of the National Ballet turned up on the doorstep tomorrow and offered you your place back, would you do it?”

“No.” Yuri knew Victor wanted him to turn his own head, but he didn’t. His thoughts were muddled enough as it was. If he looked into Victor’s eyes he would be lost. “Even if that did happen, I couldn’t. I can’t physically keep up with the demand of a full performance schedule. So it’s a moot point. I can’t.”

“I’m starting to think you don’t understand the point of ‘what if’ exercises.” Victor stared at the side of his face for another long minute before sighing and rolling back onto his back. “Was dancing always what you wanted to do?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. No need to think before answering. “It’s always been my dream. I always was one of the lucky ones. It didn’t take me trying my hand at a lot of different things before I knew what I wanted to do. It took Mari five years, four broken instruments, several dozen batches of burnt pottery, and one horrible summer of listening to her try to sing before she found her knack for painting.”

“When did you know, though?” There was something in Victor’s voice that tugged at Yuri’s heart in a way he didn’t quite understand. Something sad. It made Yuri want to roll over and wrap the other man in his arms and never let go. “When did you know that it was your dream?”

“I don’t remember a specific ‘ah ha’ moment if that’s what you’re asking.” Yuri fiddled with the hem
of his shirt in the hopes that occupying his hands would help him focus on organizing his thoughts into something coherent. “I think… I think I was five, or maybe six. Mom might remember exactly which year it was, but there was a family that rented the house next door for the summer. They were also Fives, and they had two teenage daughters, twins. They would sit outside in the afternoons and practice playing their flutes. My best friend Yuko and I were supposed to be doing chores, but whenever they would play, we’d sneak out and dance to their music.”

“It wasn’t ever anything good. Just two kids playing around, but Mom noticed. When Yuko begged her parents to let her start taking ballet lessons at the studio downtown, Mom agreed to drive us both.” Yuri smiled at the memories. “After that… I loved the music. I was never any good at making music of my own, but when I danced… When I danced it felt like I could. Like I could make music with my body. That probably sounds stupid…”

“No at all.” Victor was quick to cut Yuri off before he could really go. “I think it makes perfect sense. I can’t wait to get the chance to dance with you.”

“Oh, right.” The butterflies were back and they had brought friends. Yuri closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I guess the whole point of this thing is to be able to dance with you, isn’t it?”

“That is one of the perks.” Victor chuckled. “Or, I’ve been told it’s a perk. I’m definitely not quite on your level, but I do know enough that I’m confident I won’t step on anyone’s feet.”

“Are you going to be at the lesson tomorrow?” Yuri was sure he already knew the answer, but he had to ask. Just in case. Now that Victor had brought it up, he was having a hard time getting the image of them dipping and twirling their way around a dance floor somewhere. If he closed his eyes he could almost feel Victor’s warm hand on his waist.

“Yuri… I wish I could be.” Victor sighed and Yuri tilted his head enough to side so that he could see where Victor had raised a hand and was rubbing at his forehead. “They don’t want me to be there. Something about wanting to get footage of me dancing with whoever of the Selected is left for the first time at the ball. Father won’t let me overrule the producers on this one.”

“I heard that you sent Alexei home today.”

Yuri could sense Victor had immediately turned his head to look at him the moment the words had left his mouth, but he continued to resolutely stare straight up at the sky. The sun was almost completely down by now, the pink and purples and oranges of sunset fading into the cooler blue and violets of night. If he squinted he could make out the first peek of stars through the clouds.
The other man didn’t say anything in response, simply made a noise of assent deep in his throat and continued to stare at Yuri’s profile with an intensity that made color creep up into Yuri’s cheeks despite his best attempts to keep it down.

“Chris was thinking you might be trying to narrow the Selected down to the Elite before the ball.”

“Chris said that, did he?” Victor hummed low, and paused for second before continuing. “He’s right.”

“Victor…”

“Yuri, do you trust me?”

That question took him completely off guard and Yuri shifted so that he was sitting up, no longer content to just lie there any longer. After a heartbeat or two, Victor followed his lead and sat up as well, looking at Yuri with an open, honest expression that never failed to send Yuri’s stomach into a freefall.

Not trusting his words, it was all Yuri could do to move his head up and down in some jerky semblance of a nod.

“Then trust me when I say that I have not sent anyone home if I didn’t know for a fact they were not what I wanted.” Victor reached out then and Yuri allowed him to take his hand. “You were right with what you said before. It’s not as simple as just liking me and wanting to be with me. I know that, but that is still an important part of what I’m looking for. All the charm and ability to navigate social situations in the world isn’t going to help either myself or my future spouse if we can’t stand each other. You said you wanted the chance to learn. The chance to ease into this life. I want to give that opportunity to you, but I can’t until we make it to the Elite. There are things… There is a lot they won’t let you do and places they won’t give you access to until that time.”

“Okay… Okay.” Yuri wasn’t sure who he was trying to reassure more in the current moment, himself or Victor, but it seemed to be working on both of them if the firm squeeze of their hands together was any indication. “I understand.”

“Thank you.” Victor raised their joined hands up to place a soft kiss on Yuri’s knuckles. “God, this is so much harder than I thought it would be.”
“W-what?” Yuri, already flustered from where his could still feel Victor’s breath ghosting across his knuckles. He swallowed thickly. “What are you talking about?”

“Everything. Everything is just so much more difficult when all I want to do is drop it all and go find you.” Victor placed another kiss on his hand and Yuri’s was sure his entire face was lighting up like a beacon even in the encroaching darkness. “Do you even know how distracted I’m going to be tomorrow knowing that you’re somewhere in the palace dancing without me?”

“I…” Yuri took a deep breath, trying to draw the tiny flame of confidence that burned underneath his ribs whenever Victor was around. Letting it guide him, relax him, soothe where he was flustered and steady his hands so they no longer shook. “That’s good. I’m glad.”

“You’re glad that I’m going to be distracted?” It was clear Victor was confused, and Yuri didn’t help as all he did was smirk and scoot so close that their thighs were pressed tightly together now.

“Only if it’s because you’re thinking of me.” Yuri dropped his voice low then, just a notch or two above a whisper. “I don’t want you distracted by anyone else.”

“Oh…” Victor sounded winded. Almost as though all the air in his body had been knocked out of him all at once. “Oh, that is not fair.”

“What’s not…?”

Yuri didn’t get to finish his sentence as Victor rushed forward and brought their lips together.

Their first kiss had been soft and tentative. This kiss was deeper, more confident on both ends. Without Yuri even having to think about it, he wrapped his arms around Victor’s neck, pulling the other man closer to him and burying his fingers in the soft hair at the nape of Victor’s neck. He could feel Victor’s hands land on his hips, the heat from his palms burning through the lightweight cashmere sweater he was wearing.

It felt like his blood was on fire as it pulsed through his veins. His mind spun around and around before going completely blank. Anything but the feel of the strands of Victor’s hair sliding through his fingers, or the slip and slide of their lips against each other erased from his thoughts as though they had never been there at all.
As he felt Victor’s grip on his waist tighten and his sweater bunch up just enough that there was the 
barest whisper of skin on skin right above the waistband of his jeans, Yuri couldn’t hold back a soft 
gasp, lips parting and Victor’s mirroring the movement.

It was a long a time before Yuri made it back to his room that night.

~

“Are you okay? You look tired.” Phichit poked at Yuri’s side from where he had his elbows resting 
on either side of his empty plate, chin resting in the join where his palms met with his middle fingers 
rubbing circles into his temples in a vague attempt to stay alert and aware of what was going on 
around him.

“Hmm?” Yuri grunted and curved away from Phichit’s prodding. “I’m fine. Just… had trouble 
sleeping. Knee pain.”

“I thought your knee was getting better.” Even though his first reaction was to growl, Yuri bit down 
on the urge, instead choosing to send Chris a dark look before sliding his eyes shut again. “Right. 
Sore subject. I forget sometimes.”

Yuri had a strong feeling that Chris did not forget, but he let it go. He didn’t have the energy to argue 
right then.

He definitely wasn’t going to tell anyone present that he couldn’t stay awake because he’d been up 
on the roof until two in the morning exchanging kisses and quiet conversation with Victor. Somehow 
he didn’t think that revelation would go over well with his friends.

“Here. Coffee fixes everything.” Leo shoved a steaming cup right under Yuri’s nose.

Yuri inhaled deeply, even the scent of the drink perking him up slightly. He sat up, arching his back 
a bit in order to stretch out some of the kinks, and mumbled his sincere thanks to Leo before 
grabbing the cup and taking a deep drought, sighing happily as he could feel the caffeine hitting his 
system with a jolt.
“You are a gift to humanity, Leo.” He took another sip before placing the cup back on the table and adjusting his glasses. He was still fuzzy around the edges, but he could feel some amount of clarity returning to him.

“I want you to remember this feeling the next time you’re grumpy and want us out of your room.” Leo grinned and they all laughed for a moment. “So… Who’s excited for the dance lessons?”

“I’ve cycled back around to being terrified I’m going to make a fool of myself in front of everyone and Victor.” Phichit sighed heavily as he pushed a pile of eggs around on his plate with his fork. “I had a nightmare last night where I looked down and found out I literally had two left feet. Then I panicked because I had no idea how I was going to find someone that was willing to sell me just two left shoes. Then I knocked over a table and champagne went everywhere. You were all there. Laughing at me.”

“We wouldn’t laugh at you, and I doubt there will be champagne at our lesson.” Yuri smirked as he took another drink of coffee. “I wouldn’t worry about embarrassing yourself in front of Victor. He won’t even be there.”

“But what about the shoes, Yuri? It’s going to cost a fortune if I have to buy two pairs every time I need new ones. And what am I supposed to do with the right shoes? Throw them away? That’s such a waste!” Everyone was laughing now and Phichit affected an overwrought wounded look on his face. “See! You’re laughing at me already. Yuri, why would you lie to me like that?”

“Does it count as laughing at you if you’re laughing, too?” Guang Hong pointed out between giggles. “Come on, if we don’t hurry we aren’t going to have time to change. Mila said we could wear sweats today if we wanted.”

Yuri let himself be drug back upstairs and to his room where he could change his clothes and exchange his glasses for contacts once again.

Redressed in loose grey sweats and a blue athletic shirt, Yuri met his friends in the ballroom, which was empty aside from a table against the back wall that contained a speaker system.

“I guess we get to use this room for its intended purpose for the first time.” Leo remarked as they moved through the empty space to claim a spot by the floor to ceiling windows along the edge of the room. “I wonder if it going to look as good in person as it does on TV when they show footage from the Christmas Ball every year.”
“I’m going to assume they won’t have the massive tree, but I’d expect everything else will be close to being the same.” Chris dumped the small duffle he was carrying on the floor and sank down next to it. He looked up at Yuri with his normal bright grin. “Should we stretch or something?”

“I don’t think so?” Yuri shrugged as he deposited his own bag next to Chris’ and took up a spot on the floor not too far away. “I mean… I’m sure it couldn’t hurt, but basic ballroom doesn’t require a ton of warming up and I doubt Queen Lilia will have us do any truly complicated maneuvers.”

“Queen Lilia?” Even underneath his perpetual tan, Leo looked pale. “No one said anything about Queen Lilia being here.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine!” Even though his words were bright and cheerful, there was a glint of something that might have been fear in Phichit’s dark grey eyes. “Look at it this way, she might be the mother-in-law to one of us someday.”

If anything, that statement only served to make Leo look like he was about to throw up.

“What do you think about showing us some stretches, Yuri? Like you said, it couldn’t hurt.” As though to demonstrate his willingness to distract everyone present, Chris stretched his long legs out in front of him and reached for his toes.

Stretching did seem to help, and they were back to making easy conversation by the time the other men started trickling in.

The entire atmosphere of the room dropped several degrees as the loud clacking of heels on marble flooring echoed throughout the large room, heralding the arrival of the queen.

Even Yuri felt a shiver of something close to fear run up his spine. Queen Lilia made an imposing picture, flanked by both Mila and Celestino as she strode across the floor with measured steps. Her back was ramrod straight and her gaze sharp as she took in the scattered groups of young men, all of whom had snapped to attention at her arrival.

“So are you all going to sit there with your mouths open like a bunch of mindless trout?” Queen Lilia stopped in the center of the room with her hands placed on her hips. “Line up and let me get a good look at you.”
In the scramble of motion as nineteen men bolted across the room to form a straight line for Lilia’s inspection, Yuri almost missed it as Yurio slumped into the room with Otabeck hot on his heels.

“Why do I have to be here again?” Even though he was grumbling, the room was made for sound to carry so Yurio’s words reached them even if he might not have intended them to.

“Because your brother has left us with an uneven number for the time being and there is no such thing as too little practice.” Lilia didn’t even turn as she addressed her stepson. “Go on. In line with you, too. Next time you might remember to pay attention in your lessons for a change.”

Yurio grumbled and scuffed his trainers against the marble floor, but he did as he was told, shuffling over so to slot himself at the end of the line next to Yuri. Once there, the teen shot Yuri a glare that could have peeled paint before crossing his arms over his chest and turning the focus of his intense stare at the ground.

“Otabeck.” As the queen called his name, Otabeck also snapped to attention. “The young prince should be occupied for several hours at least. You are dismissed.”

“Your Majesty.” Otabeck bowed deeply even though the queen still hadn’t turned around, before straightening back up, turning on his heel, and striding out of the room without another word.

“We shall start with the waltz. It’s simple enough, and even if we can’t move everyone along to more complex movements you’ll at least have something to fall back on.” Lilia ran her eyes up and down the line. “First of all, please step forward if you have familiarity with ballroom dancing. I wouldn’t suggest trying to overexaggerate your skills. You won’t impress anyone with an easily disproved lie.”

Yuri got the feeling they weren’t going to impress her no matter what they did, but he took a step forward as Yurio did the same next to him. He glanced down the line and saw Chris, JJ, Guang Hong, and Seung-Gil also step forward.

“Perfect. I’ll pair you up and you can work with Celestino on your own.” Lilia stated plainly and in a tone that did not invite questions or protests.

“Can I at least pick my partner?”
As usual, Yurio hadn’t gotten the message or didn’t care to receive it.

“No. You might want to remember this moment the next time you push your tutor into a fountain.” Yurio turned a bit red at that and refused to meet his step mother’s gaze, muttering something unsavory under his breath as he did. “Since you should all be familiar with the basic steps, I want you to focus more on switching. A good consort should be able to lead and follow as the situation requires.”

The five men nodded to show their understanding and Yurio snorted in response.

“Prince Yurio, you shall be paired with Mr. Giacometti.” Yurio stomped a foot and glared down the line at where the taller man was grinning cheekily, but even as he opened his mouth to complain, he snapped it shut again as the queen leveled an icy glare at him before turning her attention back to the others. “Mr. Lee, your partner will be Mr. Ji. That leaves Mr. Katsuki and Mr. Leroy together. Celestino?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Celestino took his cue and motioned for their group to follow him. Everyone moving to follow his lead with varying levels of enthusiasm.

Celestino took a moment to play with the audio equipment until music began to play. It was slow and steady, the perfect combination of strings and percussion to be able to keep time with. Before he knew it, Yuri was face to face with JJ, both of them looking at each other with obvious hesitation.

It was painfully awkward at first.

They were both stiff, neither one of them willing to give up the lead at first. Their unwillingness to be flexible caused a few toes to be tread on before they grudgingly agreed to a silent compromise and Yuri stepped back and let JJ guide him in the familiar steps of the waltz.

“You’re pretty good.” The compliment took Yuri by surprise and when he didn’t immediately answer JJ sighed as he shifted his balance and spun Yuri out away from his for a moment before they came back together and settled into the same fluid rhythm. “Where did you learn to dance?”

“Here and there.” Yuri paused as they followed the music through a series of turns, both of them concentrating on their footwork for a moment in order to avoid any further collisions as they both got used to each other’s styles. “I had several instructors when I was young, but for the past five years I was with the National Ballet. I’m surprised you didn’t know. There’s been a fair amount of gossip
“Can you blame us?” JJ asked as the music changed and Yuri seamlessly took over, guiding JJ back into a no frills box step as they resettled into the new beat. “You aren’t exactly a social butterfly and you somehow manage to spend more time with Prince Victor than the rest of us combined. Can’t you see where some of us might have been worried you could possibly be up to something? If it makes you feel better, I don’t listen to the gossip. I’d rather formulate my own opinions. You do make that difficult, though.”

“I didn’t mean to.” Yuri wasn’t sure if he should apologize or not, but JJ beat him to the punch before he could come to a decision.

“And I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.” Their steps stuttered for a moment as Yuri saw JJ battling with whatever it was he wanted to say. “I think we’ve all done and said a few things we didn’t mean over the past month.”

“It’s been an adjustment.” Yuri agreed, taking his turn to spin JJ out and waiting until they came back together again before going on. “I haven’t been shutting you out on purpose. You just…”

“Have a difficult personality?” JJ laughed loudly. “That’s nothing I haven’t heard before. It’s always been part of playing the game. You don’t think I was able to become a popular model by just sitting still and looking good, do you?”

“I… Well, no, probably not.” They twirled around and switched leads again, Yuri stepping back gracefully and allowing JJ to guide him once more. “This shouldn’t be a game.”

“You’re right. It shouldn’t.” Yuri hadn’t expected JJ to agree with him. If the way JJ’s lips quirked up into a slight smirk was any indication, his surprise had been noted. “I’m starting to realize that.”

“Oh… That’s… Good?” Yuri wasn’t sure what to say, so he didn’t say anything at all.

They moved around their corner of the floor in silence for a bit, switching back and forth every so often with who was leading. They both exchanged a knowing look as they noticed Queen Lilia pause where she was trying to teach Leo and Phichit how to move without almost pulling each other’s arms out of their sockets in order to stare at them with her expression blank for a long moment before turning back and sharply correcting Phichit’s posture.
“And here I was thinking she couldn’t be impressed.” JJ chuckled and Yuri couldn’t stop a few giggles of his own from escaping.

“I think we’ve passed muster.” It was easier now. Almost as though they were both on the same page for the first time since meeting. Yuri wasn’t sure he was quite ready to call JJ a ‘friend’ per se, but he wasn’t an enemy. “I’m much happier with her ignoring us.”

“Me, too.” JJ agreed enthusiastically before going quiet again for a brief moment. “Yuri, I know you don’t owe me anything, but… Can I ask you a favor?”

Yuri bit his lip as he thought about it. JJ was right. Yuri didn’t owe him anything. They’d barely even spoken before today and even if JJ wasn’t actively spreading gossip about him behind his back, he hadn’t tried to stop anyone else from doing so.

But JJ was trying. He was just as far from home and alone as the rest of them. They all handled the stress in different ways. JJ’s way was definitely on the opposite end of the spectrum than what Yuri was comfortable dealing with, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a good person underneath the carefully crafted confident image he chose to project.

So Yuri nodded, giving the other man permission to ask.

“You have the prince’s ear. Could you put in a good word for me?” Whatever it was Yuri had been expecting, it definitely hadn’t been this. He almost tripped over his own feet and it took them a few beats to pick up where they had left off. “I understand if you don’t want to, but I haven’t had any alone time with Prince Victor yet. I just… I just want the chance to see what could happen. Surely you can understand that?”

As much as he didn’t want to admit it, Yuri did know that feeling. It was the whole reason he was here after all. Hadn’t dropping his application off in the first place been his own attempt at making sure he didn’t leave behind any regrets. And he had made Victor promise not to hold back if there could be someone else here that he might also be compatible with. Could he really say he earned Victor’s affections if he held someone back from spending time with him for selfish reasons?

“I can promise to talk to him, but I can’t promise he’ll listen.” The smile that broke out across JJ’s face almost made it worth it, even with the unpleasant shimmy of his stomach at the thought of Victor spending any time alone with JJ. “Okay?”
“Thank you.” The music was finally drawing to an end and they came to a stop, letting go of each other quickly. “I’ll owe you one. Redeemable anytime. JJ always keeps his word.”

Before Yuri could respond there was a yelp of pain from off their left and they turn to find Chris jumping up and down, clutching at his shin in pain as Yurio stalked off spouting curses under his breath.

That outburst brought their session to an early end and Yuri hurried over to grab his bag and run back to his room to wash up and change for lunch.

He had a lot to think about after all.
Chapter Ten – Upheaval

For the most part, the next day started like any other had since they had come to the palace. Yuri woke up and stretched as Minako rustled through his wardrobe trying to find the perfect outfit for him to wear for the first half of the day. He was even getting used to spending a few minutes in front of the mirror applying a light coat of makeup on his face.

The only thing out of the ordinary had been JJ stopping him in the hall on the way to breakfast in order to thank him. Yuri had been able to catch Victor after lunch the day before and bring up JJ’s request and Victor had gone ahead and sent a note to JJ that same evening, asking to spend some time with him in the afternoon today. There was still a part of Yuri that wasn’t sure how he felt about the whole situation, but what was done was done. He’d made a promise, and he’d kept it.

“Are you sure you didn’t leave it somewhere?” Leo and Phichit were already at their regular table in the dining hall by the time Yuri got there. As Yuri slid into his seat, Phichit ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. “I’m sure it’ll turn up. I’ll bet it’s in your room somewhere. Maybe one of your attendants saw it lying around and put it in a safe place you haven’t thought to look in yet when they were cleaning up. Face it, without them your room would look like a hurricane had swept through there.”

“What’s missing?” Yuri asked as he settled into his seat and set about folding his napkin in his lap exactly the way they’d been taught.

“One of my cameras.” Phichit explained with a heavy sigh. “I could have sworn I had it out in the garden a few days ago, and I thought I’d left it in my bag in order to bring it to our dance lessons
yesterday. I hoped to get a chance to take some pictures, but Queen Lilia never left the beginners alone and by the time I thought to go through my bag later it wasn’t there. I’m starting to wonder if it was even there in the first place, but I can’t for the life of me figure out where I could have left it. I’m usually super careful about this.”

“Leo’s probably right. Your attendant might have seen it in your bag while cleaning up and put it somewhere safe.” Yuri tried to think back to the day before, but he couldn’t remember even seeing a camera in Phichit’s bag. “Or you thought you’d packed it and you didn’t. Either way, I’m sure it’s going to turn up sooner or later. I doubt anyone stole it and with all the maids and guards running around here, someone is bound to find it and bring it back to you.”

“What if someone did steal it, though?” Phichit sounded distraught. “That was my favorite camera, too. The most expensive one I own. My siblings all saved up one year to buy it for my birthday.”

“Why don’t we help you look for it after breakfast?” Yuri offered. “I can even go grab Minako and see if she can ask some of the staff if they’ve seen it.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea.” Chris’ booming voice heralded his arrival as he took the chair across the way from Yuri as he often did. “What are we looking for?”

“Phichit’s camera. It’s missing. He hasn’t seen it since the day before yesterday.” Yuri explained as he immediately reached for the small pitcher of cream that had been placed more on his end of the table and offered it up to Chris. Sitting at the same table with the same people for over a month now had given him an insight into their daily routines. Enough to know that Chris took his morning coffee with enough cream he wasn’t sure it even qualified as coffee any longer. “We’re going to help him look for it after breakfast.”

“I’ll help.” Accepting the cream from Yuri, Chris cheerfully began preparing the steaming cup in front of him for consumption. “I’ll ask around and see if anyone else wants to help, too.”

“Thanks, Chris. That would be amazing.” Phichit seemed to perk up a bit with the knowledge that he was going to have help in his search as soon as their meal was over. “You guys are the best. I can’t believe we didn’t even know each other a month ago. Sometimes it feels like we’ve been friends forever.”

“Close quarters tend to do that to people.” Chris smiles and waves as Guang Hong enters the room and makes his way over to them. “If I had to do it again, I would love to be trapped in an opulent palace for months on end with you guys, too.”
“When you put it like that, you make it sound like we've been kidnapped.” Yuri remarked evenly as Guang Hong pulled up his chair and exchanged greetings with Leo in the background. “Although, if we have been kidnapped, I have to say this whole experience has been much better than I would have expected.”

“Agreed. Ten out of ten, would allow myself to be kidnapped again.” Phichit laughed as servers appeared out of the woodwork and began leaving bowls and plates of food in the center of each table.

The room seemed smaller now, more intimate in a way. The tables had always seated six, but there were fewer of them now, those whose companions had already left moving onto tables where there was extra space. Sometimes Emil or Michele, and once even Seung-Gil, took the often empty space at their own table, but today it remained open.

King Yakov and Queen Lilia were at the head table with Yurio taking up the spot next his father that Victor usually claimed. The Crown Prince was absent for now, but Yurio actually looked less grumpy than usual and he was carrying on a conversation with his father and stepmother that contained fewer grunts and growls that Yuri had ever heard.

Yuri was in the middle of buttering a piece of toast when Victor sank gracefully down into the empty seat between Guang Hong and Phichit with a bright grin and a happy wave.

“Good morning!” Victor chirped happily as he removed the napkin from off the top of his plate and folded it neatly in his lap. His blue eyes sparkled as he looked at each of them in turn, and this time when his eyes lingered the longest on Yuri there wasn’t even the briefest of seconds where Yuri worried it could just be his imagination. “Ah, I’m so sorry I’m late. I took Makkachin on his morning walk and he caught sight of a squirrel and wouldn’t give up until he had the poor thing really and truly treed.”

About three-fourths of the room was staring at their table now with expressions that ranged from confused, to obviously jealous, to oddly relieved. The reaction of those who had been graced by Victor’s presence was mixed as well, with most of them freezing in their seats. Leo even had his mouth hanging open a bit in surprise.

“Morning.” Chris was, per usual, not phased at all by the new development and he didn’t even look up from where he was spooning sugar over his oatmeal. “You don’t look too worse for the wear even with your morning adventure.”
“Yes, well, I pay my attendants very well to make sure I don’t leave my rooms looking like a complete mess.” Napkin settled, Victor sat back and allowed one of the servers to pour tea into the cup at his place. Yuri watched with rapt attention. How had he managed to spend a little over a month here and not know Victor drank tea for breakfast and not coffee?

“Never let it be said they don’t know how to do their jobs.” Chris placed the sugar bowl back in its proper place and shot a look at Yuri from across the way. Even though Yuri wasn’t the best at interpreting non-verbal communication, he didn’t need to be proficient in the skill to know Chris was asking for him to help out and not let the conversation die. Yuri sent him back a subtle nod in response. “What do you think, Yuri?”

“If they are able to put up with Victor, I think they deserve a raise.” A smattering of nervous laughter washed around the table at Yuri’s bland statement. Victor even snorted into his tea a bit before regaining his composure.

“Ah, Yuri. As mean to me as ever.” Victor placed a hand over his heart and Yuri rolled his eyes in response. He never would have guessed that underneath Victor’s carefully crafted public image there was such as adorable goof ball and minor drama queen hidden. “You might want to be careful or else everyone else will start to think you don’t like me after all.”

“Wait. Were we trying to trick them into thinking I like you?” He tried to keep a straight face as he said it, but Yuri couldn’t stop from breaking down into laughter as Victor’s mouth fell open. He just looked too adorable with his jaw hanging slack like that. “Oh, you should see your face right now.”

There was half a beat of silence before Victor threw his own head back and laughed deep and loud. From the point, the whole table followed, even reserved Guang Hong who was trying, and failing, to hide his giggles behind his hands.

The ice well and truly broken this time, the conversation flowed from there. Victor was a master at small talk, which while not being a trait that necessarily surprised Yuri, it did go a long way to help keeping him at ease.

When Victor was occupied talking with someone else, Yuri took the moment to watch him. He’d never been able to share a meal with Victor this close. Mealtimes where Victor was present were hit or miss and even when he was there, he had always sat with his family before, the distance between them too great for Yuri to notice any of the finer details.

Victor had chosen a bowl of fruit and a blueberry muffin to go along with his tea. Yuri wondered if he always ate such a light breakfast. It made the pile of pancakes dripping in syrup on his own plate
look downright indulgent in comparison. As he cut off another moderate sized bite, Yuri caught himself trying to guess what kind of tea Victor was drinking.

By the time he noticed that he was distracted by the way Victor was able to make spearing a slice of strawberry on the end of his fork look graceful, Yuri forced himself to stop, terrified he was going to be caught staring. He wasn’t sure what he would say if he was, but he knew enough about how he tended to react when flustered to know it wouldn’t be good.

The meal was over far too soon, everyone dispersing to enjoy the spare hour they were given in the morning for personal time.

Even though he had a stack of letters from home for him to read and respond to waiting for him in his room, Yuri hung back. Victor also didn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave and it didn’t take long until they were the last people left aside from the staff scurrying around cleaning up in order to get the room ready for the next meal.

“You sat with us today.” Once again Yuri was struck by the sudden urge to kick himself. “I mean… That was a thing you did… Sitting with us… For a meal… Feel free to stop me at any time because I don’t see how any of these sentences are going to get any better from here.”

“I wouldn’t rely on me to ever stop you. I’ve come to find that I am rather fond of listening to you babble.” Victor reached out and grabbed Yuri’s wrist, pulling him so there was only a few centimeters of space between them. “As for eating with you… I don’t know if you noticed, but Yurio stole my chair.”

“I’m fairly certain they could have made a spot for you if Yurio didn’t want to move.” Yuri wished there weren’t so many people still milling about. Right then the only thing he wanted was to feel Victor’s strong arms wrapped around him. “You do know you’re going to have to start sitting at the other tables, too.”

“A small price to pay for breakfast with Yuri Katsuki.” Victor didn’t seem concerned at all that they weren’t alone as he reached up with his spare hand and cupped Yuri’s jaw gently. “I want you to know the entire time I’m sitting at another table, I’ll be wishing I was sitting with you.”

“Victor… You shouldn’t say things like that. What if one of the other Selected hears you?” Even as he said the words, Yuri knew he only half meant them. There was a part that was growing larger every day that loved the thought of others knowing he had access to Victor’s full attention whenever he wanted it.
“Then they hear me. I don’t see anything wrong with that.” Victor must have seen something in Yuri’s face because he sighed and stroked his thumb along Yuri’s cheekbone. “You’re probably right. We should still be careful.”

“It’s the fair thing to do.” Yuri leant into Victor’s touch, hoping to communicate through his actions what he couldn’t say out loud. He hoped Victor understood that the last thing he wanted was to follow the fair course of action. “Can I see you later?”

“I think that’s one of the silliest questions you’ve ever asked me. If I didn’t have to meet with the Minister of Finance in five minutes I’d pull you away right now.” Victor lean forward and Yuri couldn’t breathe. He knew for all Victor’s flirting, the other man wasn’t likely to kiss him in broad daylight with so many eyes around, but that didn’t stop him from wanting it. “Tonight? After dinner.”

“It’s a date.”

~

Phichit’s camera turned up just before lunch. One of the guards brought it to him as soon as they were done with their morning history lesson. He said he’d found it outside on one of the many covered patios when he’d been doing his rounds the night before. With that mystery solved, all of Yuri’s friends were in a good mood as they went back to their rooms to freshen up before lunchtime.

There were whispers in the halls as Yuri made his way to his room, but he was used to tuning those out by now. The other men were always talking about someone. Often it was Yuri, but equally as often it wasn’t. Chris ended up as a target fairly frequently and there had been some murmurs as they were settling into their history lesson about JJ since he hadn’t been subtle at all about how happy he was to be asked to spend time with Victor in the afternoon.

Yuri took it as a good opportunity for practice over the past few weeks. He didn’t know what he wanted to do. Didn’t know if he was going to be able to compartmentalize the way Victor could and move from being himself to being whatever he needed to be in public, but blocking his ears to gossip and hurtful comments seemed like as good a place as any to start.

In retrospect, he wished he’d paid a bit more attention instead of dismissing everything offhand.
At lunch Victor settled at a table that contained JJ, Georgi, Seung-Gil, Michele, and Emil. With the prince in the room the whispers tapered off as they always did. No one wanted to risk Victor hearing them speaking ill of another Selected on the off chance that it might offend him.

Surprisingly, the sixth seat at their table didn’t remain empty at this meal either, as Yurio plopped down into the seat without even a word of explanation just as Yuri and Phichit were settling into their normal places.

“Deigning to join us mere mortals for the second time in as many days?” Chris asked, not affected at all by the thunderous look he was receiving from the teenager.

“Do you want me to kick you in the fucking shin again? Because I will.” Yurio snarled. “If Victor can sit with you losers, then I can, too.”

“No one said you couldn’t.” Yuri pointed out, surreptitiously scooting his chair back about half a meter just to be on the safe side. Typically Yurio didn’t bother him, but he also wasn’t in a position to want a bruised shin or risk Yurio missing with the table blocking his view and hitting Yuri in his bad knee by mistake should the prince choose to actually lash out. “I think what Chris’ terribly phrased question was supposed to ascertain was why you chose to sit with us.”

“Because I want to.”

There clearly wasn’t going to be any other elaboration to that response as Yurio simply sat with his arms crossed over his chest glowering. Almost daring the rest of them to try and question his motives again.

No one was brave enough to try, so they glossed over it and focused instead on other matters.

“The ball isn’t for another month and half. You’ll have plenty of time to practice.” Guang Hong was currently patting Leo on the back as he frowned down at his Caesar salad. “It’s not going to be that bad.”

“I think that ridiculous dream where Phichit had two left feet isn’t looking quite as ridiculous any longer.” Leo sighed heavily. “At least then I would have an excuse for being such a klutz.”

“You weren’t that bad.” At Yuri’s statement, Leo looked up and sent him a bland look. Yuri cringed
and changed tact. “Okay, so it was that bad. We can fix this, though. We have plenty of spare time right now. We can practice whenever we can if you want. Between Guang Hong, Chris, and I we’ll have both of you dancing a proficient waltz in no time.”

“I’ll help.”

All five heads instantly turned to where Yurio had returned to stuffing half a sandwich into his mouth in one go after speaking, either completely oblivious he was being stared at or not caring. If he had to hazard a guess, Yuri would have said it was probably that the young prince didn’t care.

“You’ll help?” Phichit was the first to regain use of his speaking skills. “Why?”

Yurio chewed violently for a moment, swallowed, and glowered at all of them. “Because I want to. Why? Am I not invited?”

“No, you’re invited.” Yuri was quick to try and prevent anyone from saying anything they might regret. Especially since Chris had that glint in his eye that meant he was about to try and tease the young prince again. “In fact, do you think anyone would mind if we used the dance studio? It does have a built-in sound system which could come in handy. Beats having to hum or count time out loud.”

“I think Lilia would be thrilled someone is using it for its intended purpose. Not that you’d be able to tell, of course.” About half the contents of Yurio’s sandwich had ended up on his plate and he set about stuffing some lettuce and tomatoes back between the slices of bread. “When were you wanting to do it? Today?”

“Probably not.” Chris responded easily. “Most of us have appointments with the tailor this afternoon.”

“Yeah, I’m in that group, too.” Phichit took a sip of his water. “I may have ripped a few of my nicer suits trying to get a good angle for photographs last week.”

“Minako makes most of my clothes so I’m free.” Yuri tapped his fingers against the table, trying to think through his schedule to make sure he wasn’t missing anything. “Even if the rest of them aren’t free, we could go practice fencing for an hour or two if you’d like, Yurio.”
“Maybe.” Yurio looked as sour as ever, but Yuri had learned by now that his ‘maybe’s’ were as good as other people saying ‘yes’.

Aside from a few tense moments when Chris goaded Yurio again, by now Yuri was sure the other man was doing it for the sake of seeing the younger boy turn various shades of red, lunch progressed pleasantly enough. They made plans to meet the next day in the dance studio and Yuri was feeling content as they parted ways once the food had been cleared. His friends were off to prepare for their appointment with the palace tailor and Yuri and Yurio were off to the dance studio to practice.

As he made his way from his room and down to meet Yurio, Yuri was feeling centered and calm. This felt more like normal. More like a routine. Waking up, eating breakfast, suffering with everyone else through their lessons in the morning and carving out time in the afternoon to meet up with Yurio. Looking forward to seeing Victor after dinner.

Maybe he could do this. Maybe this wasn’t as hard as his mind was trying to make it out to be.

Maybe this was something he could have after all.

~

He parted ways with Yurio with about two hours to spare before dinner was due to start. Yuri hiked his gym bag higher on his shoulder and grinned to himself at the thought of being able to take a long soak. He hoped Minako had gotten a chance to replenish his stock of bath salts.

Yuri was already mentally relaxing in his massive porcelain tub when he turned a corner and almost ran face first into two other men.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I should have been paying better attention.” Yuri stumbled back and looked up to find it was Hayden and Kieran, both of them looking at him as though they were happy to have been almost mowed down instead of upset.

“Yuri. We were just looking for you.” Kieran shifted his body so that it took up more space. It would be a tight squeeze for Yuri to shoulder past them now and there was now a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Where have you been?”

“Um… Here and there.” Yuri shrugged, suddenly intensely aware of the dowdy picture he made in
his leggings, athletic shirt, glasses, and with hair that was flattened with a thin layer of dried sweat. He shuffled from side to side, trying not to let his nerves show too much. “I really am sorry for almost running into you, but I really should go. I need to get ready for dinner. If you still want to talk, I’m sure I can find some time to meet up with you after…”

“Oh, this won’t take long. Besides, we wouldn’t want you to have to give up any of your precious alone time with Prince Victor.” Hayden was sneering as he said it. Looking at Yuri as though he was something mushy that was attached to the bottom of his shoe. “You have to continue to secure your spot here somehow after all.”

It felt like someone had poured ice water down Yuri’s spine. He clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes, now starting to get a hint of exactly what this might be about. Feigning ignorance for the moment, Yuri tried to keep his tone cool and polite. “I don’t understand what you mean. I haven’t done anything more or less than anyone else has done.”

“We’re sure you believe that, too.” Kieran took a step forward and Yuri stumbled back, trying to keep the same amount of distance between them they started with. “You don’t have to hide it anymore, Yuri. Most of us have known for ages. We just didn’t have proof.”

Yuri didn’t even have a chance to ask what they were talking about before Kieran shoved a rolled up magazine into his hands.

“Go on. Take a look.” Kieran’s smirk only widened as Yuri fumbled with the glossy pages. “I think page seven will interest you.”

The last thing Yuri wanted to do was follow their directions. He knew without having to look that the magazine contained nothing he wanted to see, but he couldn’t help it. It was like his entire brain was frozen and he couldn’t do anything other than what he’d been told.

Page seven turned out to be a large photospread. Well, page seven and page eight, and there was a wonderfully helpful red arrow in the bottom corner that directed Yuri to page nine if he was looking for more. What was in front of him was more than enough to give him everything he needed to know and more.

They had obviously been taken from far away and some were a bit blurry around the edges, but the camera has been a good one with a powerful zoom and there was no mistaking Victor’s striking silver hair even in the dim lighting from the setting sun.
Because Victor was in every picture. As was Yuri. Embracing. Kissing. Yuri’s hands tangle in Victor hair, Victor’s hands below the concrete railing, leaving it to the viewer’s imagination exactly where they were or what they could have been doing.

“It’s timestamped.” Hayden pointed out, no small amount of glee in his voice. “You both disappear underneath that railing for a long, long time. Then pop back up at two am. Those photos are on page nine if you want to see them.”

The magazine fell to the floor as Yuri tried to keep breathing. His eyes burned and his head spun and he knew without a doubt that he was being pushed right into a panic attack, but he forced himself not to give in to his body’s urge to curl up in a ball on the floor right then again there.

Any words he might have tried to string together died in his throat. This time when he lurched forward Kieran and Hayden moved out of his way, apparently satisfied now with what they had done.

Yuri forced himself to take calm and measured steps, ignoring as the other men made pointed comments at his retreating back. He had gotten the gist of what they were trying to accuse him of by now. He didn’t need their verbal confirmation.

As he passed the open door to the Entertaining Room, Yuri heard someone say his name followed by a bust of laughter.

He froze. They were talking about him. They were laughing at him. They thought… They thought that he… Well, Yuri knew exactly what they thought he was. What the whole country now thought he was.

Yuri ran.

He didn’t know where to go. The walls felt like they were closing in, but there was nowhere safe outside. Nowhere he could go where there wouldn’t be eyes on him. But he had to go somewhere. He couldn’t run blindly through the halls like a lunatic.

Without any input from his brain, his legs took his to his room. Yuri’s hands were trembling so badly he dropped his key four times before he managed to slide it into the lock. He burst through the door and slammed it behind him, tossing his bag somewhere off to the side and grabbing his chest, trying to force his body to take deep breathes. He knew it was a losing battle, but he had to try.
He had to try because Minako was still there. She had been folding towels by his bed when he’d burst in and she was looking at him now with concern.

“Yuri! What… Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” Yuri moved away from the door as Minako hurried around the bed, reaching out for him before he ducked and dodged out of the way. The last thing he wanted right then was someone touching him. “I just… I don’t feel well. I think I’m going to lie down for a bit. If I need you, I’ll ring.”

“Yuri, I can’t leave you like this.” Minako pulled her hands back and didn’t try to touch him again, but she still hovered there. Watching him. Yuri shivered involuntarily even though he knew there wasn’t anything but concern for his wellbeing in her searching gaze.

“Please… Just go.” Yuri ran his hands through his hair and grabbed tightly to the last remaining straws of his sanity. “Go!”

She looked like he’d slapped him, but Minako did as he said. As soon as the door closed behind her Yuri sank down to the floor and sobbed.

What was he going to do now?

~

There was a long stretch where Yuri felt as though nothing was moving. He was dimly aware in the back of his mind that time was passing. That time didn’t just stop because he’d forgotten how to breathe. How much time had passed, however, he had no way to tell. No way to measure the seconds or minutes or hours.

At some point he’d grabbed the blanket from off his bed and drug it and himself into the bathroom. The cool porcelain of the tub felt amazing against his heated skin and pulling the blanket over his head meant that he couldn’t see anyone and they wouldn’t be able to see him even if someone did stalk him all the way to his private room. Or, at least that’s what his anxiety had convinced him of in any case. Yuri wasn’t exactly in a position to argue with the primal urges in his brain at the moment.
He heard Minako come in at some point and then leave again quickly and without saying a word to him. Maybe she hadn’t seen him. Yuri hadn’t exactly come out of his cocoon to greet her, so it was possible she’d glanced around and, not immediately seeing him, had left again.

The part of Yuri that was currently in control didn’t believe that, though. That Yuri was convinced she’d seen him and then run off to spread the word that not only was Yuri willing to turn over his body for a chance at a throne, but he was also currently a blubbering mess hiding under a blanket in his bathtub because he’d had his feelings hurt.

So not only was he apparently a whore, but he was also a pathetic baby, too.

The worse part was that it wasn’t just Yuri’s reputation at stake. It was Victor’s, too. The whole country now thought that Victor was the kind of person that would… Well, Yuri wasn’t sure exactly what they thought had happened since he hadn’t actually read the article that went along with the photospread. He was sure they wouldn’t have been brave enough to slander Victor, but that didn’t mean people wouldn’t draw their own conclusions. Wondering just what kind of person Victor really could be to let himself be drawn in by Yuri’s dubious charms.

Oh, god, this had been such a massive mistake.

His chest felt like it was on fire and his heart refused to stop its frantic rhythm. Every square inch of his body throbbed and ached like he was one giant bruise. His right knee was curled uncomfortably underneath him and was pressed into the edge of the tub in a way that sent lances of pain through his entire leg, but he couldn’t bring himself to care or bother to shift around enough to fix it. Even though his body ached, his mind was numb.

Yuri swallowed hard, almost choking on his own spit as he tried to clear his airways enough to take in his next breath. He grabbed at his own shirt, twisting his fingers in the material in a vain attempt to stop them from trembling.

“Yuri?”

He’d been so wrapped up in his own mind, he hadn’t heard anyone come in, but he’d recognize that voice anywhere.

Victor.
“No, no, no, no.” Yuri shook his head back and forth and groaned, trying to roll over and not getting very far as the tub was too narrow to allow it. “No, this is not happening.”

“Yuri, please.” He felt slight pressure on his shoulder through the blanket and he knew Victor must has reached out to touch him. He shivered, but didn’t shift away. He felt immobilized by the prince’s gentle touch. “Please.”

“I can’t.” Yuri coughed, swallowed, and then coughed again. His lungs itched and his throat felt rubbed completely raw.

“Yes, you can.” Victor began to rub circles on his shoulder. “I know you can.”

“How can… How can you possibly know that?” Yuri felt his nails digging into his chest and he tried to focus on that. On the little pinpricks of physical pain instead of the treacherous whirl of his thoughts. “I… Victor, I can’t.”

“You can.” Victor obviously wasn’t going to give up, and Yuri hated and loved him for his stubbornness in equal measures. “I know you can. I’ve seen you pick yourself up more times than I can count this month alone. You can do it again. I know it. Now, come on. Please, Yuri. At least sit up. For me.”

Yuri groaned, but he was somehow able to force his unwilling body to obey enough to move to a sitting position. Once there he slumped against the side of the tub for support, the top half of his body still obscured by the thick blanket.

“Okay. Perfect. There we go.” Victor slowly began to pull the blanket off of him, giving Yuri plenty of opportunity to stop him. Yuri had run out of energy, though, and he wouldn’t have been able to put up much of a fight even if he’d wanted to. He flinched as the fresh air hit his face, but he still didn’t pull away, even when Victor reached out with both arms and pulled his limp frame up and pressed Yuri against his chest. “Oh, Yuri. I am so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Not your fault.”

Yuri tried to keep his head turned away from Victor. He knew his face was a mess, snot dripping from his nose and tear tracks drying on his cheeks. The last thing he wanted to do was ruin Victor’s shirt, but he wasn’t given a choice as Victor cradled the back of his head in his hands and held Yuri just below his collar bone.
“It doesn’t have to be my fault for me to be sorry.” Victor was running a hand over Yuri’s tangled hair now and Yuri made a small, strangled noise deep in his throat as he burrowed deeper into Victor’s chest. He could smell Victor’s cologne and the familiar scent calmed him further. “Shhh… You’re fine. I’ve got you.”

Yuri didn’t say anything then. He’d run out of words. Run out of everything. He just let himself be held. Let Victor cradle him and rock him gently as though he were something precious. Something worth protecting.

The last thing Yuri remembered was Victor humming softly into his hair.

Then everything went dark.
Some housekeeping!

I know I haven't answered ALL the comments from the last chapter, but it's coming up on 2 am here and I have work in the morning and I want to get the chapter out since I'm leaving for a vacation soon! I'll be gone from Thursday through Monday, but I am going to be bringing my computer and the friend I'm going with is the one who bothered me to write this thing in the first place so I might get an update or two out there. We'll just have to wait and see.

Since there's been some questions in the comments, I want to take a quick moment to break down the castes a little bit. Since I couldn't find a straight list of exactly how they were structured in the source material (if anyone knows where I can find that, please let me know so I can see how much I screwed this up, lol) and their explanations are kind of vague and spread out throughout the books, I've taken liberties and even made several changes to make the events of my own take on the story make a bit more sense.

Ones - The royal family. King, queen, princes. Spouses and their immediate families (parent/siblings).
Twos - The upper class. Basically the 1%. A few celebrities like actors and singers that have a massive national following (A list celebs). The upper branches of the military (generals and high ranking officers).
Threes - Upper middle class. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists. Anyone who could afford upper level education. More members of the military (Lower ranking officers, the Royal Guard in the palace).
Fours - Small business owners, farmers (who own their own farms), management positions at manufacturing and other jobs. The lowest ranks of the military (foot soldiers).
Fives - The creatives. Artists, musicians, actors and singers (not A list), dancers.
Sevens - Manual laborers. Farm workers and the like. Sporadic work opportunities and very low pay. Unskilled workers and day laborers.
Eights - The homeless and criminals.

You are born into your caste, but can have opportunities to move up through marriage, which comes with a fee for the person moving into the higher caste unless they choose to just become the lower caste of the pair or straight 'buying' your way into the next level (very expensive). The caste you are born in determines what you can and can't pursue with your life. A Five has to pick some kind of an artistic trade. They can't be a teacher or own a business, etc.

Hope that clears up some of the confusion!
When Yuri woke up he noticed three things immediately.

One, he had the world’s worst headache. He could see bursts of colors behind his closed eyes that beat in time with the throbbing in his skull.

Two, he had his arms wrapped tightly around something soft and fuzzy and warm. That was much nicer than his headache and buried his face in the soft curls in an effort to hide from the brighter ambient light in the room.

Three, there was also something warm and soft molded to his back. That was a bit more concerning as it felt like it was moving, or at least breathing, gentle inhales and exhales pressing against his back that matched his own.

Yuri tried to think, a much more difficult task than usual with his headache getting in the way. He slowly traced his way back to the last thing he remembered from the night before. Unfortunately, the last thing he remembered was crying in the bathtub before Victor had shown up and slowly rocked him to sleep while he’d been draped against the other man’s chest still half in the tub.

He was in his bed now. Probably. It felt like he was tucked away underneath the covers with a mattress underneath him in any case. He also had a sneaking suspicion that he knew exactly what, or rather who, it was holding onto him tightly from behind.

If he wanted to find out for sure, he was going to have to open his eyes, though.

It took him another two minutes to gather up the courage to open his eyes, but when he did the first thing he saw was that the fluffy thing he was hugging was actually Makkachin. The poodle was lying stretched on his stomach with his big head resting on the edge of Yuri’s pillow. His deep, brown eyes were open and as soon as he saw Yuri was really and truly awake, Yuri felt the dog’s tail start to beat against his shins.

“Mmmmm… Makka.” There was still a dark, gaping hole that had opened up right in the center his chest the night before, but when the dog made a quiet noise and licked a long stripe up Yuri’s cheek some of the edges filled in a little bit.

There was a solid weight across Yuri’s side, resting right under his ribs and he looked down to find there was a pale arm settled there over the navy bedspread. Yuri carefully scooched out from under
the arm and away towards Makkachin, the poodle stretching and hopping up and leaping onto the floor as soon as Yuri released him. There was a brief struggle as the owner of the arm subconsciously tried to hold him back, but Yuri was patient and strangely calm now and he waited until the arm relaxed again before resuming his movements until he had finally won free and was able to sit up and turn to look down at the man curled up behind him.

It was Victor. Of course, it was Victor. It wasn’t like that had been a hard guess to make, but there was something about seeing him there, solid and warm and real, that had Yuri’s heart twisting and turning in his chest.

The curtains were drawn, but there was a gap where they didn’t quite close all the way and light from outside was pouring in through that gap, falling across Victor’s face, lax and peaceful in sleep.

While he looked peaceful now, there was signs that he hadn’t spent the most restful of nights. His skin was as pale as usual, but there was a pallor there that hadn’t been before and there were heavy bags underneath his eyes. His hair spilled out across the pillow, tangled and greasy and in dire need of a thorough wash. He was still in his slacks and dress shirt, shoes missing and he was laid out on top of the covers instead of underneath them.

It honestly looked like nothing short of sheer exhaustion had been what had pull him into the depths of sleep.

Yuri felt a pang of guilt at being the cause for Victor’s stress before he brutally shoved it back down. Now was not the time to feel sorry for himself. He’d done plenty of that already. This wasn’t just about him any longer. Victor was involved whether he wanted to be or not and that meant Yuri was not about to give into the nagging urge to retreat back into a blanket fort in the bathroom again.

Questions started to filter into being in the back of his mind. What was going to happen now? Why was Victor even here? Surely he didn’t harbor any thoughts of being able to salvage this situation? The horse was out of the barn, so there was no point in closing the door now. Even Victor couldn’t be optimistic enough to think there was a chance that this could turn out any way other than Yuri packing his bags and going home with his head bowed and his tail between his legs, could he?

Somehow Yuri got the feeling that if anyone could attain that level of optimism, it would be Victor.

Yuri knew he should do something. Or maybe go somewhere. He didn’t want to wake Victor, the prince looked like he needed all the rest he could get, but he hadn’t the faintest idea where he could go. He had a sinking suspicion that there was nothing friendly waiting for him outside his room. For what felt like the millionth time, Yuri wished his room was on the ground floor so sneaking out the
window was a viable option for escape. Although, he wasn’t sure where he could go outside that would be any better than inside.

Okay, one step at a time. First, he should take care of his headache and the rawness in his throat. Maybe then he’d start to feel more like himself, though he knew well enough from experience that the hole in his chest and the fuzziness in his brain would take several more days to go away completely. At least if he took care of his physical body, it might give him back just enough clarity to sort out what he should do from there.

Moving one centimeter at a time in an effort not to disturb Victor, Yuri shuffled out from under the covers and tried to push to his feet. There was a moment where he wobbled in place, a dull ache in his right knee causing him to pause just in case, but the knee held firm and Yuri walked on shaky legs to the bathroom.

He found his glasses on the bathroom counter sitting on top of a washcloth that was still a bit damp around the edges. Thanking the heavens that he hadn’t managed to lose or break them in the fugue state of the night before, it wouldn’t have been the first time, Yuri settled them back in their rightful place, sighing as the world came back into total focus at last.

Yuri avoided looking into the mirror until he’d grabbed a glass and a packet of pain medication from a drawer and tossed two pills back, swallowing hard in order to force them down past his swollen vocal cords. Even knowing what he’d find reflected there when he did look wasn’t enough to prepare him for the full picture.

Saying he looked like death warmed over was an understatement. The light tan he usually carried on his skin seemed to be completely gone, leaving him looking pale and wan. His eyes looked sunken and sad, dark purple bruises sitting underneath them and red veins standing out against the whites of his eyes completing the bloodshot look. His hair was a disaster. Tufts were sticking up from every imaginable angle and he winced as he ran a hand through strands to find them slick with grease and even crusted with dried sweat in a few places. His bottom lip had been chewed raw and there was a split right in the middle that was a dark red, proving that he’d bitten himself hard enough to draw blood at some point.

Even his clothing looked rough. His blue athletic shirt was wrinkled and twisted beyond repair and his leggings had a small tear just above his left knee that he couldn’t for the life of him remember happening.

There was a loud rustling noise from the bedroom and Yuri turned his head, wondering if it was just Makkachin maybe taking up the spot Yuri abandoned or even pawing at the door to be let out.
“Yuri!? Yuri, where are you? Shit.”

Hearing Victor’s voice, sharp and panicked and accompanied by the groan of springs protesting a sudden heavy movement, knocks the wind out of Yuri’s body as effective as a solid punch to the gut. Yuri just reacts, turning and stumbling back into the room to find Victor standing, wide eyed and a with a hand buried in his hair as he frantically scans the empty room.

“I’m here. I’m sorry… I’m here.” Yuri’s voice is deep and rough, even with the water he’d just drunk. “Victor…”

Yuri wasn’t sure what he was going to say. Wasn’t sure what he even could say, but he didn’t get a chance to try as Victor was across the room in the space of a blink and had Yuri pulled tight against his chest.

Automatically Yuri’s arms slid around Victor’s body and tangled in the fabric of his shirt right below his shoulder blades. He could feel Victor’s fingers digging into the soft skin at his waist and Yuri’s glasses were almost bumped right off his nose as he pressed his forehead into the crook of Victor’s neck and he felt Victor burying his face in Yuri’s hair.

“Oh, god…” Victor lets out a pained huff of air and tried to pull Yuri even closer, even though there wasn’t even a millimeter of space between them. “When I woke up and I you weren’t there… Shit, Yuri. I thought you were gone for good.”

“I’m here.” Yuri repeats, almost as though he was trying to convince himself as much as Victor. He takes a deep breath and clears his throat. “I didn’t… Where would I even…?”

Yuri gives up trying to makes sense of his messy thoughts and he closes his eyes and repeats himself once more because there isn’t anything else he can say.

“I’m here.”

“I know, I know.” Victor still doesn’t loosen his grasp or pull away and Yuri allows himself to be held. To be comforted. Even though he knows the feeling of being safe in Victor’s arms is a fleeting thing that will be gone soon, he craves it now and is far too selfish to end the contact on his own. “Just… Please don’t ever scare me like that again.”
“But…” And here Yuri does wriggle and squirm for a bit until Victor gets the hint and lets him pull back enough so they can look at each other face to face. “But this is going to happen again. That’s what… That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you this whole time. I get that I haven’t done a great job of explaining it, but… Even if we can somehow fix this stupid, fucking mess something else is going to come along and I’m going to freak out. It’s not… It’s not something that goes away and it’s not something I can control.”

“What…?” Victor looks utterly confused, and Yuri frowns, instantly trying to figure out a better way to explain himself. Then Victor’s eyes widen in recognition and it’s like a light goes off. “Oh! Oh, Yuri, I didn’t mean… I… Okay, I’m not going to lie, seeing you like that last night did scare me some, but that’s not what I was trying to say. That… That is something we can figure out. Together. I’m not even worried. What I was scared of was waking up and not knowing where you were. I thought, and I know it’s stupid, but I thought you were gone. Forever. That’d you’d left me without even trying. You did promise me you’d at least come to me before giving up.”

Yuri stared up at him in stunned disbelief. It was like someone had dumped him in a pool of water. Everything was coming through muted and distorted, like he couldn’t even trust his own ears to tell him the truth. The truth being that Victor didn’t care he’d been an embarrassing mess before. That Victor wasn’t even worried about it because he already had enough faith in both of them to know that they would be able to work through it and come out all the stronger for it on the other side.

That Victor had seen him at his worst and had not only stayed, but had been terrified not by the thought that he could wind up stuck with Yuri for the rest of his life, but by the fear that Yuri might leave.

Victor removed his right hand from Yuri’s waist and straightened the glasses on Yuri face gently before cupping his jaw and forcing Yuri to keep his face tilted upwards. His blue eyes were soft in the dim light breaking into the room from the gap in the curtains and his silver bangs were falling across his forehead in messy disarray.

“I don’t… I don’t want you to go, Yuri. Unless… Unless you want to…?” Victor trailed off there, letting the question hang heavy in the air between them.

Without giving his traitorous brain any time to put up an argument, Yuri was shaking his head forcefully.

“No.” The force in Yuri’s tone surprised even him for a second, but he didn’t focus on it. Didn’t let it distract him from what he wanted to say. “No, I don’t want to go. I… I never want to go, but…”
Victor cut him off there with an index finger placed over his lips and Yuri stuttered to a stop.

“Then don’t. We’re going to fix this.”

“Together.”

~

They were both quiet and subdued as they took turns using Yuri’s shower. Part of Yuri was dying to ask Victor what had happened, what he knew, and even what he didn’t know, but he forced it down. Apparently when Minako had brought up Makkachin at Victor’s request the night before, she had brought up a fresh change of clothes for the prince as well as an unused pair of pajamas.

Appearances back to something more normal, Yuri claimed his desk chair, leaving the bed for Victor. They still had more to talk about and Yuri knew he wasn’t going to be able to focus like he needed to if he were pressed up against Victor again, so he’d purposefully created the distance. Victor pouted, but eventually agreed to go along with it.

“We’re going to have to call for Minako soon.” Victor states idly. He looked much better, freshly showered and with color back in his cheeks. There was still a tension in his body, though. In the straightness of his spine and the clench of his jaw. “We’ve missed breakfast by now, so we’ll need have food brought up. Makkachin is going to need to go out eventually as well.”

“You make it sound like we’re going to be up here for a while.” Yuri fidgeted in his seat. “Won’t someone notice you’re missing?”

“I’m sure several people already have, but Father knows this is far more important than anything else I might have had scheduled for today.” The tension held in Victor’s frame intensifies and he leans forward, eyes locked onto Yuri’s, almost daring him to try to look away even as nerves start sparking to life in the pit of Yuri’s stomach. “I just promised you we were going to figure out what to do about this together, and I meant it.”

“I didn’t think you meant now.” Yuri grumbled. “What is there to do? It’s already out there. If the whole country hasn’t seen it by now, it won’t be long before they will. We can’t take it back or act like it never happened.”
“I didn’t think we could.” Victor frowned and sighed. “We can’t take it back or hide it or even sweep everything under a rug, but we can control the way we react to it. Or, at least, the way the public sees us react to it. Think of this as your first official lesson in media relations.”

“But first… Food!” Victor’s mood instantly brightens and he pops up to his feet and strides purposefully to the hidden button in Yuri’s wall that will send an alert to Minako. Before Yuri can even properly react, Victor has pushed the button and bounced happily back to the bed, patting his lap as he settles back down as a cue for Makkachin to plop his big head across Victor’s thighs. “I know I’ll think better on a full stomach, at least.”

Yuri hummed something he hoped was close to an agreement before sighing and rubbing his temples. The headache he’d banished earlier was threatening to make a return. “Fine. Food first.”

“Trust me. You’ll feel much better panicking on a full stomach.” Victor winked and Yuri turned red as, as though on cue, his stomach emitted a deep rumbling noise. “It seems as though part of you agrees.”

“Shut up.” Yuri folded his arms across his chest and stared resolutely at towards the bathroom door and away from Victor even as the prince threw back his head and laughed. “It’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny.” Yuri didn’t have to look to know that Victor was currently wearing a goofy grin. “Come on, Yuri. I know it feels like the world is ending, but it’s not. You can laugh.”

Yuri grumbled, but he felt a smile twitching on his lips despite his best efforts to stop it and he knew Victor had seen it, too.

He hated to admit that Victor was right. Yuri hadn’t eaten anything since lunch the day before and now that the hungover feeling from his panic attack was subsiding, his body was letting him know that it had become accustomed to being fed on a regular schedule and did not take kindly to having that schedule disrupted.

As Yuri went to open his mouth to try to convince Victor that they didn’t need to necessarily wait until the food actually got there to start talking, there was a knock on the door.

“That was quick.” Yuri muttered to himself, getting up and hurrying over to let Minako in, slightly confused as to why she had knocked this time when she usually burst right in.
He opened the door and stepped back automatically, making room for Minako to come in.

Only it wasn’t Minako on the other side of the door. It was the king and he barely waited for Yuri to clear out of the way before he stepped forward, scowl on his face and his full attention on where Victor was sitting on the bed, humming a happy tune and running his fingers through Makkachin’s fur.

“Victor!” Yakov’s gruff voice filled the tiny space and Yuri felt as though he was rooted to the spot. “What the hell were you thinking, running off like that! No, don’t answer that. I know you weren’t thinking. You never think! You only make it worse!”

Luckily for all of them Minako was hot on the king’s heels and she slipped through the door, closing it quickly behind her and pushing past both Yuri and the king carrying a tray of something that smelt wonderful. As soon as she’d set it on Yuri’s desk she turned around and sighed.

“Sorry, Victor. I tried to stop him, but he was there when my pager buzzed.” And Minako did look sorry as her gaze flicked back and forth between the three of them before settling on King Yakov. She took a deep breath and stood up straight. “I think we all know Victor deserves to be yelled at, but the others will only be tied up in their lessons for so long. After that we won’t be able to stop them from going back to their own rooms if they want to do so. I don’t think I should remind the both of you that discretion is the better form of valor here, do I?”

“Thank you, Minako!” Victor hopped up to his feet and grinned broadly, ignoring everything else in favor of hurrying over to the tray and claiming the bowl of mixed fruits that had obviously been left there for him. He turned around right as Makkachin bounded off the bed with a sharp bark, trotting over to his master’s side, sniffing along the edge of the desk as though to see if there was anything up there for him. “Ah! I almost forgot. Do you mind taking Makka for his walk and feeding him? I think it’s safe to leave him in my rooms when you’re done, but I can always go get him again if needed.”

“Already two steps ahead of you.” Minako fished around in her pocket and pulled out Makkachin’s red lead, clipping it to the poodle’s collar and heading out to leave, pausing briefly by the door to shoot another warning look towards the king. “Remember. Keep it quiet.”

With that, she was gone, the door clicking locked behind her.

Yuri still hadn’t moved. Didn’t know if he even wanted to move. So far the king hadn’t even seemed to see him. If he moved then he was sure to catch his attention and then Yuri was going to be the one getting yelled at and he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to survive that. Not without food. And the food was currently on the other side of the room. A place he couldn’t go without drawing attention to
himself and that attention would end up with King Yakov yelling at him and…

Great, now he was thinking in circles.

“You.” Apparently, Yuri’s luck had run out whether he moved or not and King Yakov spun around and pointed directly at him. “Go. Eat. We have much to discuss and not nearly enough time to discuss it in thanks to my utter idiot of a son.”

“I love you, too, Father.” Victor remarked blandly, but he spared an encouraging smile for Yuri, who managed to unstick his feet long enough to edge around the king and reclaim his desk chair, not quite trusting his legs to hold him up. “Hmmm… I guess the pancakes are for you. Oh, and she even remembered my tea. Father, we should give Minako a raise.”

“No one is getting a raise.” Yakov rumbled, though Yuri did have to admit the other man looked more irritated than truly mad now. It was enough to give Yuri his appetite back and as soon as Victor had moved back to his spot on the bed, Yuri set about cutting tiny portions off his pancakes and nibbling on them slowly. “And you are lucky I’m not shipping you away to Siberia until this all settles down.”

“I hear Siberia is nice this time of year. Can Yuri come, too?”

“Victor!”

Victor looked chastised by the combined force of Yuri and Yakov shouting his name. Yuri’s inflection had been more ruffled and Yakov’s more furious, but it got the job done and the prince proceeded to pout and pop a blueberry into his mouth instead of speaking.

There was an awkward silence as both Yuri and Victor continued to eat. Minako had brought coffee for Yuri, strong and with one spoonful of sugar, just the way Yuri liked it. If the king didn’t want to give Minako a raise, Yuri was going to find a way to do it himself. The woman was an angel in disguise.

“Did they confess?” Victor broke the silence, his tone purposefully light, though there was an iciness in his eyes that Yuri had never seen there before.

“The guard did. A few hours ago.” Yakov was still standing in the middle of the room, but he looked
less imposing now. More serious if that was at all possible, but less angry. “He admitted to smuggling the photos out and sending them to the magazine. He’s adamant that he didn’t know what was in the package. Lilia believes him, but he’s already been dismissed with firm instructions not to make any travel plans until we decide if we’re going to levy formal charges against him.”

“And the other two?” Victor asked.

“Nothing.” Yakov let out a terse sigh. “We don’t need their confession. The guard is a Three. I suspect if we offer him a deal to keep his caste and not go to jail, he’ll be more than willing to do whatever we ask him. As for the other two… This would be much easier if you hadn’t caused a scene and threatened to send everyone home if no one stepped forward.”

“I was angry and they deserved it.” Victor grabbed a piece of melon between his index finger and thumb, holding it up to the light before taking a delicate bite. “In retrospect, I have to admit it wasn’t my finest moment, but what is done is done.”

“Victor…” Yuri bit his lip and held back a groan. “You caused a scene?”

“They deserved it!” Victor protested. “I thought you would be on my side!”

“I was on your side until I found out you caused a scene.” Yuri dropped his fork back onto his plate with a loud clink. “What about me says that I would be happy or even comfortable with you doing that?”

“You should listen to him.” Yakov grunted and held up a hand as Victor opened his mouth to complain further. “No, don’t speak. He has a brain and knows how to use it. Listen to him.”

Yuri was sure he looked less like he had a brain and more like a slack-jawed moron in that moment. The last thing he had been expecting was for Yakov to agree with him about anything.

“If we’re going to press charges against the two boys that did this we should move quickly. We’ll want that process started before we can move onto damage control.” Yakov was looking at Yuri as he said this and Yuri started in his seat.

“Oh… We don’t… We don’t have to do that, do we?” From the thunderous look on Victor’s face, Yuri didn’t have to have him answer the question to know his opinion. He focused on Yakov
instead, as he was keeping his expression carefully blank. “Do we?”

“Technically they only broke a contract, not the law.” Yakov was looking at Yuri in a way that made his skin prickle. “They will be sent home, of course. There will be fines, and they will have to return anything that has been paid to them and their families from their stipends. You would have a case for slander if you choose to pursue it and I have been assured that treason charges can be brought with some creative interpretation of the statutes in the nondisclosure agreement you all signed.”

“No one broke the law.” Victor cuts in sharply. “Father, I’ve already told you…”

“I know, Victor. You don’t have to tell me again.” Yakov’s face fell slightly and Yuri noticed just how deep the older man’s wrinkles actually looked. He looked tired, as though he also hadn’t gotten nearly enough sleep. “I’m not the one the two of you are going to have to convince.”

“It’s a stupid law.” Victor had placed his fruit aside and was practically glaring at his father in obvious defiance. “It’s antiquated and sexist and horrible. Seriously. How is it anyone’s right to police if two consenting adults want to have sex before marriage?”

“You don’t have to tell me that!” Yakov snapped back. “But it hasn’t been abolished yet and abolishing it now is only going to make the both of you look even more guilty.”

“So, we’re going to let Hayden and Kieran have a chance to get away with what they did, while Yuri has to suffer through people trying to prove he’s the one that should be in jail?” Victor didn’t just look angry any longer. He was way beyond that. “We can’t do that!”

“Well, we can’t file charges.” Yuri interrupted before Victor could go any further. At Victor’s wounded and confused look he pushed forward. “Don’t look at me like that. We can’t. Hayden and Kieran are Twos. They have more than enough money to mount a capable defense. Their trial would go on for months, if not years, and even with the weight of the royal family behind the prosecutor, there’s a chance they might get off with nothing more than a slap on the wrist anyways. Not to mention the whole process is just going to perpetuate the debate around our non-existent sex life and if you are trying to use your position to keep it quiet. So, no, we cannot file charges. Dismiss them, fine them, and send them home with a stronger nondisclosure agreement.”

The silence once Yuri is done is long and heavy. Victor’s jaw is working and he keeps opening and closing his mouth as though he’s trying to speak, but has lost all grasp of language. Yakov is calm, once again looking at Yuri as though he’s a puzzle that’s had its last piece snap into place so the picture is clear for the first time.
“The boy is right.” It sounds like Yakov would rather have his wisdom teeth pulled out sans anesthesia than admit it, but he does admit it. “You don’t have to like it, Victor, but he is right. It’ll make the damage control that much easier.”

“Damage control.” Victor spits out the words as though they were a particularly vile curse.

“Yes, damage control.” Yakov snipes back. “I’ve already contacted several media outlets. They are going to begin to run stories questioning the veracity of the timestamps on the pictures. As the photos are the only ‘proof’ anyone is ever going to be able to provide, that should be more than enough once we air a special interview with the two of you on The Report on Friday.”

“A special interview?” Yuri asked hesitantly. “Oh… No, that’s a good idea.”

“You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to.” Victor was quick to reassure him even as he shot a warning glance at where Yakov’s expression had turned more sour than normal.

“Yes, I do.” Yuri removed his glasses for a moment so he could pinch the bridge of his nose in an effort to either solidify his slippery thoughts or to help continue to keep his raging headache at bay. “This is part of it, Victor. You asked me if I wanted to stay, and I do. I really, really do, but I might as well pack my things and leave if I can’t do this.”

“Perfect.” Yakov didn’t give either of them time to say anything more. “Yuri, if you would please press the buzzer for Minako once I’m gone. Give it five minutes for her to make sure the way is clear and then you need to leave, Victor. On time. Not a second too soon or a second too late. If there is even a whisper of further scandal, I won’t have a choice. He will have to go home.”

“Yes, Father.” Victor didn’t look happy about it, but he agreed and the king gave them both one last look of warning before leaving.

Yuri waited for the lock on the door to engage once more before reaching over and pressing the buzzer in the wall. His task accomplished he placed his glasses on the desk and leant back in his chair, letting out a soft sigh.

He heard Victor get to his feet and the muffled sound of bare feet on carpet before there was a solid warmth at his back, Victor’s arms slipping over his shoulders and holding him close.
They didn’t say anything. There wasn’t anything more that could be said. Yuri had made his choices and he was going to have to live with them.

But he didn’t have to do it alone, he thought to himself as he reached up to take Victor’s hands in his own. Neither of them had to do anything alone again if they didn’t want to.

He let that knowledge comfort him even after Victor was long gone and there was nothing more than rumpled blankets and two dented pillows to even prove he’d been there at all.

~

Yuri found out later that the story that had been used to explain his sudden absence was that Yuri had fallen ill. That he hadn’t even seen the magazine and had been locked away in his room all night in the hopes that whatever bug he’d caught would pass quickly.

“All right, Yuri, you’re okay now?” Phichit asked as he reached out to place the back of his hand against Yuri’s forehead for what had to have been the fifteenth time in the past half hour alone. “You still look awfully pale.”

“I already feel a hundred times better.” Yuri batted Phichit’s hand away and his friend pouted at him from his perch across the bed from Yuri. “By breakfast tomorrow I’ll be back to normal.”

“Are you sure…?” Leo asked. He was sitting on the floor with Guang Hong, both of their backs pressed against the bed as Chris had claimed Yuri’s desk chair for his own and Phichit had commandeered more than half of the bed. “I don’t think anyone would blame you if you wanted to take another day or so to let things blow over.”

“Was it really that bad?” Yuri didn’t want to ask, but he had to pretend he’d never seen the magazine. That he didn’t know how bad it really had been. “I mean, Minako said Victor was upset, but it can’t really be as bad as she made it out to be. It was just a trashy gossip rag, right?”

“Ha! Victor’s fit was tame in comparison to Yurio’s. Victor glared and threatened to bury whoever had leaked the photos so far down their own families would forget they’d ever existed, but Yurio flipped over three tables and broke several chairs.” Chris sounded amused by this point. He’d been concerned when they’d first arrived, but once he’d seen how Yuri wanted to play it, he’d been the first to follow his example. “And he screamed at JJ for like ten minutes. I thought the poor boy was
going to piss his pants. Not that I blame him. Yurio can be a force to be reckoned with when he wants to be.”

“Oh… Oh, I should apologize to him.” Yuri pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around his knees. “JJ didn’t do anything. According to Minako, it was all Hayden and Kieran. They saw Phichit’s camera in his open bag in the garden and they took it, got their stupid pictures, and bribed a guard to smuggle them out and send them to the magazine. JJ wasn’t involved at all.”

“Well, we know that now.” Chris rolled his eyes. “Yurio didn’t know that then. I also think he might have been saving up for an opportunity to scream at JJ for a while now and this was a convenient excuse.”

“JJ seems cool about it. I think he understands.” Guang Hong twisted around so that he could look back at his friends. “Everyone who’s left understands. No one thinks you and Victor you know… Did anything…”

“Well, no one thinks you did anything other than kiss. Good job with that, by the way.” Phichit winked and Yuri felt a rush of warmth fill his cheeks. “You have to tell us what it was like. Is Victor as good a kisser as he looks? Inquiring minds want to know… Purely for scientific reasons, of course.”

“I can’t be the only one you can ask that question.” Yuri ducked his head so that half of his face was obscured by his knees.

“As far as we can tell, you’re the only one he’s kissed.” Leo had also twisted around and was looking up at Yuri with wide eyes. “Come on. Spill the beans. Is he a good kisser?”

“He’s… Well… That is…” Yuri huffed and straightened. “I’m not telling.”

“You are no fun, Yuri Katsuki. No fun at all.” Chris was pouting, but he didn’t press.

“You said everyone who’s left.” Yuri quickly changed the subject before someone else could try to ask him about Victor’s kissing skills. “Have others gone?”

“Oh, shit. I forgot you wouldn’t know.” Phichit hit himself on the forehead with the heel of his hand. “Aside from Hayden and Kieran, Victor sent seven others home at the same time.”
Yuri stopped and did the math in his head.

“Wait… But that means…”

Chris offered up a thin smile and nodded grimly. “Yes, that’s right. Ten left.”

“We’ve made it to the Elite.”
Chapter Notes

I'm baaaaaacck!

Vacation was amazing and far more jam packed than I thought it would be. Apparently there was a lot more to do in Miami than I thought there would be (Yes, I was in Miami. Now that I'm safely home, that's where I was!). We spent barely any time in the hotel that wasn't wasted sleeping. Lol.

Without further ado, here is Chapter 12! The interview we've all been waiting for! Lilia! Maybe dancing?????? You'll have to read and find out!!

Chapter Twelve – Elite

The next day was Friday, the day of The Report and the day when Yuri was supposed to sit side by side with Victor on live television and give his side of the story behind the leaked photographs. He knew he shouldn’t worry, that the questions would have already been carefully screened and that Victor would be with him the entire time, but he couldn’t help himself. So far, the Selected had been left to sit quietly in the tiered seating area that had been set aside for them on the studio stage since their arrival a month and a half ago. They hadn’t been expected to speak, just to sit there and look regal, a constant reminder to the population to tune into the special broadcasts during the week so they could see the development of the Selection process and follow closely as Victor tried to find his future spouse.

Now Yuri was going to have to address the entire nation, and about a topic that was immensely personal. He was going to have to convince strangers he’d never even met before of something he literally had no way to prove. If he couldn’t do it, if he couldn’t convince the majority of the population that nothing had happened and himself and his intentions towards the prince were pure, this could all be over. He could lose Victor before he even had a chance to have him.

As determined as he was to make sure that didn’t happen, Yuri still found himself too twisted up in knots to even eat much in the way of breakfast that morning.

They had a rare morning off. Apparently, there was a lot that needed to be adjusted in their curriculum now that Victor had made such a deep cut and dropped it down to the Elite weeks before originally anticipated. Yuri begged off spending time with any of the other Elite, citing that he was still feeling a bit under the weather.
He’d gone back to his room, intending on staying there until he was required to make an appearance at lunch. Once there he’d felt restless, though. Too restless to sit still. Too scared to let his frantic thoughts catch up to him.

There was a stack of letters on his desk that he had been wanting to reread before sitting down and trying to think of something to write to his family that was truthful, but also didn’t give anything away. Not quite in the mood to sit and think for the moment, he avoided that corner of the room like the plague.

Minako had set up shop in front of Yuri’s closet, making minor alterations to some of his wardrobe. A month and a half of rich palace food had gained him back any weight he’d lost before coming there and then some so Minako was constantly having to let out hems, or take in seams. After about fifteen minutes of watching him pace back and forth between the bathroom and his bed, Minako had snapped that he was making her dizzy and that he should sit down or get out.

Yuri weighed his options. He had too much energy to sit still or try to take a nap. It was too early to take a shower and that option didn’t really suit his need to move around anyway. A quick glance out the window showed him the garden was out of the question as he could see Phichit, Chris, Emil, and Michele hanging out on a blanket under the willow tree. The roof was also out, for obvious reasons, and he didn’t like his odds of not running into someone in the Entertaining Room or on the way to the library.

As he stood in the center of the room dithering about what to do, he caught sight of where his duffle bag was poking out from where he had half shoved it under his bed at some point.

Suddenly he knew exactly what he wanted to do.

~

Yuri knew the back way to the dance studio by heart now. His luck must have rebounded because he didn’t even run into a guard or servant the whole way there.

The place was empty as he knew it would be. Yurio had sessions with his tutors in the morning and Yuri got the impression no one else regularly used the studio for much of anything. He was safe here for the time being. Safe to do whatever he wanted.

Safe to dance.
He wanted to. He could feel the music deeper than just in his bones. It was entwined in every cell of his being. His muscles twitched with energy that was desperate to be released and it felt like an electrical current was buzzing across the top of his skin.

He tried to keep his mind blank as he trudged to the changing room at the back of the studio. Somehow he knew the more he thought about what he was about to do and all the ‘what ifs’ that went with it, the more likely he was to lose his focus and take the coward’s route.

But he needed this. Needed it like he hadn’t needed something in a long time. It had been too long. Too long being scared of what might happen if he gave himself the chance to try to return to his first love. He’d been keeping it bottled up inside until it felt like he was going to burst if he didn’t let it all out.

Yuri plugged his music player into the auxiliary jack for the sound system and queued up his warm-up playlist. The familiar strains of soft, classical music filled the empty space and he moved to the barre to go through his stretches.

He’d left his glasses in his bag, but was close enough to the mirror to be able to see his reflection, even if the edges were blurry. As he stretched, he watched his technique. The curve of an arm, the fluidity in his movements as he raised a leg as high as he could. As much as he tried, he couldn’t ignore the glint of metal peeking out of the black material of his brace, but it was almost like an afterthought as he tried to push to get the extension he needed out of his right leg even as it tried to restrict him.

Yuri took his time stretching. So much so, that his playlist had started over and was already on the second song on the list again by the time he felt sufficiently warm and loose. Taking his cue from the music currently playing, Yuri moved across the floor, trying some simple turns and footwork, grinning a bit despite himself as his body fell into the familiar patterns as though it had never stopped.

Already his fevered thoughts were quieting down. The nauseous feeling that he’d woken up with was fading into the background and the tightness in his throat was abating. He felt like he could truly breathe for the first time in months.

Feeling confident he leapt into the air in time with a sudden swell of the music, forgetting about his knee until it was too late.

For a split second, he almost pulled back and tried to pull out of the jump before he could land. The
flutter of fear tried to grab him tightly and stifle his movements, but he shook it off. He had to
commit. Had to trust he would be able to catch himself as he landed.

That he could land on his own two feet.

A small jolt traveled up his right leg as his foot hit the floor and his knee bent to take the brunt of the
landing, but everything held firm and he moved smoothly into a languid pirouette, coming to a stop
in the center of the floor even as the music played on in the background.

He had done it. Granted, he hadn’t gotten the height he used to be able to get and he was sure his
lines were sloppy, but he’d done it. The world hadn’t crumbled out from under him. The floor hadn’t
opened up into a deep chasm and swallowed him whole. Aside from a slight twinge, there hadn’t
even been more pressure than normal in his weak leg.

He was healing.

Joy bubbling up past all his other emotions, Yuri hurried over to his music player, flipping through
his music library trying to find the perfect song. After a few minutes of searching he’d found it.

Yuri had never been a soloist for all his years with the ballet. He much preferred to dance as a part of
a group or with another dancer in a pas de deux, but before his injury he had been toying around
with some choreography for a solo piece. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was going to do with it
once it was done, but he’d thought maybe trying to offer it to one of the other dancers in the hopes
that he could have a chance to do more choreography in the future.

It has been a long time since he’d danced this piece, even in part, but as he moved back to the center
of the floor and took his opening pose the movements came back to him as though he’d just danced it
the day before.

The sound of strings filled the air and Yuri raised his arms, running them down his body before
launching himself into the fast-paced dance.

He let the music sweep him up and away. Every twist and turn and jump flowed out of him like
water being released from a dam. In the back of his mind he could hear the whisper of his instructors,
but he ignored his own internal critique. Right now he didn’t care about a sloppy free leg, or
overextending his legs in a jeté.
Right now all that mattered was being able to fly again for the first time in far too long.

His muscles burned and stretched as he pushed himself. More height on the jumps, more speed in the turns. Striking his bare feet harder against the floor in the steps and springing up with more force. Spinning around until he was dizzy and then bursting forward to sweep gracefully across the floor and into the next movement.

A few beats into the song, Yuri imagined a partner dancing with him. Someone to rush forward when he would fall back, someone he could chase as they turned away. Someone who matched him step for step and turned the dance into a duet within his own head.

If he tried hard enough, he knew he would be able to picture their face. Recognized the broadness in the shoulders or the tapering at his partner’s waist. The way their hair would catch the light just right…

The last note rang out and he ended with it, arms wrapped around himself back in the center of the room. His chest rose and fell with each heavy breath and he could feel beads of sweat trickling down his back, causing his shirt to stick to his skin. His eyes had slid closed as some point and he left them shut as he tipped his chin towards the ceiling and grinned.

He could dance again.

In the silence of the room there was a sudden noise. The sound of a single person clapping in slow, measured beats and Yuri jumped and spun, heart now beating fast against his ribs for a different reason.

“That was very well done. Rough around the edges, but very well done.” Queen Lilia was standing in the doorway, face carefully blank and eyes flashing with something Yuri couldn’t even begin to name and he flushed and instantly dropped into a deep bow. “No, no. There is no need for that. Not here.”

“I-I…” Yuri straightened up and took a deep breath, trying to bring back the calm feeling that had settled over him a few moments ago. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think anyone would be here at this time of day. I’m done if you…”

“Do you want to be done?” Lilia asked amiably.
“I… Well, that is… I don’t know.” Yuri could only shake his head slowly and shrug. It was the truth. He didn’t know the answer to that question in any context. He’d felt so sure the day before when Victor had been there and they had made their plans together, but today he was floundering. Unsure of himself again and fighting away the dark part of him that tried to convince him he wasn’t good enough. That he never could be good enough. “I don’t think so.”

“Then don’t be.” Lilia stated simply. She took a few steps forward and Yuri forced himself to stand still under her intense gaze. She must have liked whatever she saw because the ghost of a grin crossed her lips before being wiped away so quick Yuri was left doubting he’d ever seen it there in the first place. “No one can force you to be done with anything if you don’t want to be.”

“I’m not sure about that sometimes.” Yuri reached up to push his damp bangs out of his eyes, wishing now he had his glasses so he would be able to see the queen better.

“They can try. And they will. They will try every day to take it all away. You should know this better than anyone. You are a dancer, after all.” Yuri nodded at her words. He did know. He’d had to fight hard, harder than he’d ever thought he would or could, to get to where he had been before it had all come crashing down. “You don’t usually dance solo pieces. Who choreographed this for you?”

“It was just something I was playing around with in my spare time.” Yuri was about to elaborate when the true meaning of the queen’s words hit him like a ton of bricks. “Wait. How do you know I usually don’t dance solos?”

“I have not been out of the ballet world quite as long as some might think. My family has long been patrons of the National Ballet even before I danced for them myself, and we will be patrons long after this generation has ended and the next has begun. Marrying royalty doesn’t mean I have to let go of my whole self.” This time he was not imagining it. The queen was smiling at him softly. “I see things, more than some would like to think. Like right now. Right now I see a young man who is dancing a duet without a partner. What I don’t understand is why. I have known many dancers in my time. Some with more talent than sense and some with more sense than talent, but I have never known one that didn’t want the spotlight all to themselves. I have never seen someone like you, Yuri Katsuki. One who never seeks to hold that light for themselves, but who is always quick to share it.”

“I don’t… I don’t do well when I stand alone.” Yuri sucked on his bottom lip and shifted his weight from side to side, suddenly uncomfortable in his skin in a way that was all too familiar. It was the way he always felt on those rare occasions when he was on an empty stage all by himself. “It’s like… It’s like all the choreography I’ve ever learnt flies out of my head and I’m left with nothing.”

“You were dancing alone right now.” Lilia pointed out.
Yuri shook his head. “That’s different. I was alone, or thought I was at least.”

“Hmmm.” The queen hummed under her breath and took another few steps towards him. They were only a handful of meters apart now and Yuri got the distinct impression her piercing, green eyes were seeing into his very core. “In this world, we are never truly alone. You are a good dancer, Yuri. Expressive. You tell a story with your body. I think the only thing you need right now is to know which story you want to tell.”

“T-Thank you.”

The queen inclined her head towards him and turned, walking back to the door, pausing in the frame to look back at him for one last word before leaving.

“It’s time we all learned a new dance or two, don’t you think?”

And with that, the queen was gone, not even waiting to see if Yuri had an answer to her question.

~

Yuri hadn’t realized how crowded the staging area for The Report had been before until he looked around and saw there were only ten stations set up this time. Even the number of stylists and other attendants had been cut in half. It was still busy enough, but there was a level of calm to the proceedings that had been missing before.

They were split into two rows of chairs and mirrors, five to each row. Yuri’s seat was in the middle of his row with Phichit and Leo off to his left and Chris and Guang Hong off to his right. The row behind them was JJ, Georgi, Emil, Michele, and Seung-Gil. The ease of conversation between all of them helped soothe Yuri’s nerves as well. Out of all the Selected they had started with, Yuri had to admit this was not a bad group to go into the Elite with.

Yuri had discovered the odd feeling he would get while letting people poke and prod him in order to prepare him to be camera ready was absent when it was Minako doing the poking and prodding. Luckily, she was more than happy to extend her duties into helping him here as well. Today, especially, her presence was calming.
“It won’t be so bad.” Minako often liked to keep up a steady stream of chatter as she worked and Yuri always let her do it. There was something about her warm tone that always steadied him and helped him focus. “Just ten minutes at the end. How much can really happen in ten minutes?”

“Plenty, I’m sure. At this point, I’m afraid nothing would really surprise me.” Yuri stated blandly as Minako ran her fingers through his hair, applying gel in order keep his bangs off his forehead. He blinked hard, trying to get used to the contacts that he’d mostly done away with by now.

“If it makes you feel any better, some new articles managed to get in before Mila found them and burned them, and it’s not bad.” Chris turned his head and smiled at Yuri’s profile. “About ninety percent of them are taking your side so far, and the other ten percent are mostly those bargain bin gossip rags that are more useful for kindling than legitimate news.”

“You know, I never really thought about it much, but this sucks.” Phichit frowned even as he grabbed the tube of liquid eyeliner from his stylist and went about lining his eyes himself. “I usually don’t have a problem with being the center of attention, but this could be one of us someday. Whoever marries the prince is never going to be truly left alone. Victor gets pictures of himself taken whenever he leaves the property.”

“I don’t think he’d even be able to go to the store without ending up of the front page of something.” Leo said from his end of the line. “That’s insane.”

“That’s why he doesn’t go to the store.” Michele must had heard their conversation with the rows so close together now and he had twisted in his seat, waiting until the rest of them had also turned so all ten of them were looking at each other, completely ignoring it as their attendants and stylists sighed and tried to do their jobs with their charges completely ignoring them. “Or anywhere that isn’t some kind of official event.”

“That’s sad.” Yuri muttered, more to himself than anyone else. He felt Minako squeeze his shoulder and he knew she had heard him and probably felt the same way.

No one else seemed to have heard him, as JJ had started speaking as soon as Michele was done.

“I agree that it gets annoying, but you can still have some fun with it if you know what you’re doing.” He grinned and Yuri was struck by the fact that JJ’s grins had always seemed like they had been filled with cocky confidence before, and Yuri was sure there was still a bit of that under the surface as well, but there was something more there. Something beneath what had been carefully crafted over time. Something that was a lot closer to the nervous gleam that he was seeing reflected in all their faces right then. “I remember one time, right after I got my first cover shoot, I was out
catching a movie with some friends and about fifteen guys with cameras showed up. We led them on a two hour chase through the city before we lost them in the shopping district by ducking into a store and coming out wearing ridiculous disguises. That did do the trick, though.”

“That sounds like a wild night.” Emil’s eyes were wide and he was looking at JJ as though the other man had just made him think of something he hadn’t thought of before. “Does that happen a lot?”

“It tapers off some after that initial bit, but it doesn’t ever truly go away. With the prince… Well, Michele is right. He doesn’t go out often, so it might be worse for him. Or for us… You know, whichever one of us that marries him in the end, that is.” JJ shrugged and turned back to where his stylist was trying to get his attention in order to slip a black, silk ties around his neck.

“We’re sorry you have to do this, Yuri.” Guang Hong had been quiet for most of the day, but Yuri had noticed the other man sending him sympathetic glances every so often. “I don’t know if I’d be able to.”

“Yuri will be fine.” Chris had turned back to the mirror in front of him, patting down some stray hairs at the top of his head. “Morooka’s going to throw some softball questions at the both of you and then it’ll be done.”

“Ten minutes.” Minako repeated as she handed Yuri the tube of lip gloss to finish off his media ready look. “Ten minutes and then it’s all over.”

Yuri nodded, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that ten minutes was not going to be the end of it. Perhaps it would be the end of what Yuri had to do in regards to the non-scandal they were currently wrapped up in, but even if this event drifted away and was never brought up again, there was going to be something else. If he chose to stay with Victor, there was always going to be another ten minutes down the road.

Even going out into the general public for an hour long charity event ended with Victor’s face splashed across the papers. Yuri should know, he’d used to cut out those pictures and tape them to the walls of the dorm he’d been assigned for his time with the ballet and he knew for a fact he wasn’t the only one.

Yuri hadn’t even thought about it before Michele had pointed it out, but they hadn’t left the palace once since they’d gotten there. In fact, aside from the time Yuri spent in the gardens with Makkachin or his friends, they had barely even been outside.
Was that really because the royal family was too busy for outings, or was there something else to it?

Yuri clenched his right fist and pressed his nails into the palm of that hand in an effort to clear his mind. He had to get through this first and then he could worry about anything that might come down the line in the future, since he got the feeling that if he didn’t do well today there might not be a future to worry about.

Time was up, however, and Yuri didn’t get nearly enough time to chase his thoughts around in circles any longer. One of the producers was calling for them and everyone was getting to their feet, checking themselves in the mirrors one last time and making their way to the stage. Yuri fell into step even though his legs felt as though someone had poured lead into them.

The set was different this time. Gone was the tiered seating in the far corner that had always been there since their first appearance on the show. Instead there was a semi-circle of plush chairs that matched the ones the royal family sat in. The chairs weren’t tucked away in the corner of the set either. They were closer to the middle, and pushed together so close that if they weren’t careful they would be bumping elbows with the person next to them.

Another thing that had changed were the cream colored name tents sitting on the seat of each chair. Before they had always been allowed to pick their own seats so long as no one was blocking the view of anyone else. Now, it seemed as though they were to have assigned seating.

Yuri’s chair was on the end of the semi-circle, with Georgi of all people next to him. Out of all those that were left, the dark haired man was the one he had spent the least time with. In fact, he was pretty sure he could count on one hand the number of times they’d ever exchanged words and that had mostly been made up of polite greetings.

They settled in next to each other and Yuri offered up to the other man a wan smile that was returned with equal intensity.

“Good luck.” Georgi said and Yuri’s eyes widened in surprise as he nodded.

“Uh… Thank you.” Yuri scratched at the back of his neck nervously. “Now I just wish I knew what I wanted to say.”

“For what it’s worth, I think the best stories tend to have some grain of truth in them.” Georgi offered up. “Not necessarily the whole truth, but it will feel more authentic if you don’t try to deflect or make
something up on the spot.”

“Oh… Um… Thanks. That’s actually really helpful.” Yuri’s smile widened into something wide and real. He hadn’t been expecting to find support with Georgi of all places, but it was nice to know there was yet another person who was on his side.

“Don’t mention it.” Georgi waved off his thanks with a sincere grin of his own. “And don’t let this get to you too much. There are always going to be some minds that are going to believe the worst no matter you say to try to convince them, but for those people on the fence… Well, treating something with sincerity and openness can go a long way to swing them in your favor.”

Yuri was about to open his mouth to thank Georgi and maybe even ask him where he’d learned all of this, when there was a sudden hush that descended upon the studio as the royal family came in and took their places and everyone scurried to clear the set and get the cameras ready to roll.

He risked a glance over at Victor and felt warmth creep up the back of neck as the prince caught his gaze and winked in his direction.

Well, if Victor wasn’t worried, then Yuri shouldn’t be either. He knew what story he wanted to tell now. So long as he stuck to it, everything should be fine.

~

It usually wasn’t that difficult to sit still during the broadcast any longer. Yuri was used to half listening while keeping a pleasant expression on his face by now. He knew even if there hadn’t been the interview portion to look forward to at the end, he would still have felt drained by the end of the whole production, but while he was in the moment, he was much better at dealing with it.

Today there was a tense edge to the proceedings, though. Something that made his skin tingle in a way that was familiar even as it was entirely unpleasant. It seemed like everything was moving on fast forward. As though every single person was done with waiting for the heavily promoted interview and they were doing their best to cut time from the broadcast anywhere they could in order to make that portion of the evening come faster.

For all Yuri knew, that’s exactly what they were doing and, even if they weren’t, the thought didn’t make him feel any better.
His suspicions were proved correct when Morooka took the stage with twenty minutes remaining in the hour broadcast instead of the initially scheduled ten. Yuri wished he could have been surprised, but from the bland look he shared with Victor as Morooka launched into his usual introductory spiel, he knew he hadn’t been the only one concerned the producers were going to try to milk this for all it was worth and then some.

“Good evening, and thank you all for waiting so patiently.” Morooka was center stage now and a pair of stage hands were quickly dragging over three chairs to where he was currently standing. “Now, I am sure we have all either seen or heard about the unfortunate news article that was printed a few days ago. Prince Victor and Mr. Katsuki have graciously agreed to spend a little time with me this evening to answer a few questions in a live interview.”

Yuri’s heart began to pound in his chest as Morooka turned and smiled at him warmly, gesturing first to him and then to Victor for them to come up and take the empty seats across from him as he moved to settle down in his own. He forced himself to return the smile and rise to his feet with some amount of grace. He was dimly aware of Victor moving from his own position and they met in front of the chairs, the back of Yuri’s hand brushing against Victor’s as they settled down and gave their full attention to the host in front of them.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to do this, Your Highness, Mr. Katsuki.” Morooka was beaming and Victor nodded his head in acknowledgement.

“You can call me Yuri if you’d like.” He wasn’t sure if doing so was going against any set social etiquette or if he should have even said something at all or if he should have waited for Morooka to say something directly to him first, but he didn’t care for the moment. All he knew was that if he had to spend the next twenty minutes going over matters of an intensely personal nature on national television, it was going to be a lot easier for him to handle if Morooka would use his given name as though they were just having a regular conversation. He felt Victor’s hand brush against his and out of the corner of his eye he could see the prince’s lips quirk up into a soft smile. That was encouragement enough that his request had been fine. “It’s less of a mouthful.”

“Perfect! Of, course, Yuri. I don’t mind at all.” Morooka clapped his hands together and Yuri felt himself relax a tiny bit more. That hadn’t been terrible and from what he remembered of all the segments he’d seen the other man host so far, he’d always been a more down to earth presence. Encouraging and warm, which was something Yuri desperately needed right now even with Victor’s solid presence at his side. “I suppose there’s not much point in holding off, so would you both mind if we just jump into some questions?”

“Of course, not.” Victor has on his best smile. The one that could blind someone if they looked directly into it, but Yuri now knows him well enough to see the small wrinkles at the corner of his eyes that meant he was not as relaxed and content as he seemed to be. Out of everything, that helped steady his resolve the most. Being able to see through the chink of Victor’s impeccable armor and
realize he’s just as nervous as Yuri is. “That is what we’re here for after all.”

“Of course.” Morooka echoed cheerfully. “Now, I’m sure the one question everyone is dying to know is this: What exactly did happen up on that roof?”

Whew… Yuri had not been expecting such a heavy question right off the bat and he was left speechless for a moment. Luckily, Victor had either been anticipating just this question or he was much better at getting over being stunned than Yuri was.

“Getting right to the heart of things, are we?” Victor responded cheerfully enough in his own right, his smile fixed on his face and nothing giving away the warning Yuri could still hear loud and clear underneath his words. So, that hadn’t been the question he’d been expecting either. “I hate to disappoint everyone, but they already have the full story as far as that night is concerned. We spent some time talking, and there was a kiss or two, I won’t deny that, but that’s all. Nothing went further than that.”

“Some would say that it could be viewed as suspicious. The location, the late hour…” Morooka looked over at Yuri now. “Surely you can see where some people might think there is something to hide?”

“We’re not hiding anything.” Yuri wasn’t sure where that firm tone had come from. He couldn’t remember himself ever having used it before, but it was there now. He wasn’t sure who the question had even been directed to, but he knew he was the one that had to answer it. “I enjoy spending time on the roof with or without Victor. There is a fantastic view of the stars from up there, especially if you lie a blanket on the ground and rest on your back. As for the timing… Well, Victor is very busy with the day to day affairs of being the Crown Prince. There isn’t a lot of spare time during the day and I don’t mind waiting to spend time with him in the evening. I’ve also been told the stars are brighter and easier to see once the sun goes down.”

Morooka laughed at that. “Excellent point.”

Yuri felt himself relax even further. That hadn’t been so bad. The big questions were out of the way. They had to be. What could have been worse than that?

“Prince Victor, I think it’s becoming more and more obvious that some of the rumors may have gotten out of hand, but it is clear to see that there is something between yourself and Yuri. And you have recently narrowed down the Selected to the Elite. Would we be remiss to think that you might be getting very close to making your final decision?”
Or Yuri could have been totally wrong.

“Even if I do have some ideas in mind, there is still a long way to go. Now that we are down to the Elite, all ten men will see their duties increase. It will be interesting to see which ones will be able to manage the load.” Victor flipped his hair out of his eyes and smirked. “I will say that every single man that is left is here for a very good reason. I wouldn’t say that we are on the homestretch just yet.”

There was some more back and forth banter for a few moments that went entirely over Yuri’s head as he was still focusing on what Victor had said and what it could possibly mean. If it meant anything. If Victor hadn’t just been saying it to have something to say. It wasn’t like Victor could just say that Yuri was his favorite in front of the others. That would have been in poor taste, right?

Or did it mean Yuri wasn’t his favorite? Yuri had to admit he had been lax when it came to bringing up any of the others in his conversations with Victor these days. Aside from his recent request for Victor to spend some time with JJ, something he had been backed into because he was often too nice for his own good, he hadn’t mentioned even his friends in a context other than to tell a quick story about something that happened during Yuri’s day before moving on to the next subject. Victor hadn’t brought any of them up either.

Wait, why should it even matter if Yuri wasn’t his favorite? He wasn’t stupid enough to think that Victor wasn’t spending quality time alone with the other men. He’d just…

He’d just thought there had been something there. Something more. Something they were both feeling.

“Yuri, what do you think?”

Yuri froze. He should have been paying attention. Everything had been going so well and then he had to go and space out and not pay any attention because he was over-analyzing what Victor had said. Yuri couldn’t know what he thought. He didn’t even know what the original question had been.

“What do I think?” For lack of a better thing to say, Yuri repeated the question, hoping maybe by doing so something would trigger in his head and he would magically know what it was he was supposed to be having an opinion on. It didn’t work.
“Yes, what do you think?” Morooka prodded gently. “Like I said, there are some people out there that are concerned about the speed with which things have been moving. It has only been two months since you’ve arrived after all and we’re already down to the Elite. Do you have anything to say to those people?”

“Well, I would say that I don’t think there is such a thing as perfect timing when it comes to dating.” Yuri resisted the urge to frown or fidget in his seat. “I trust that Victor knows what he’s doing.”

“At least one of us does.” Victor chuckled as he spoke, but there was still an air of tension in the way he held himself. It made Yuri want to reach out and grab his hand in a show of support, but he refrained, not sure where the line would be in this situation. “I have to admit, I have found myself feeling a bit out of my depth at times, but these wonderful gentlemen do tend to be fairly forgiving where I’m concerned.”

“Speaking of the other Elite…” Morooka angled his body to bring focus to the rest of the men, watching with rapt attention from their semi-circle of chairs. “We haven’t gotten a chance to hear any of their opinions on this matter. Hmmm… Mr. Giacometti, what about you? Did you get the opportunity to read the article?”

“Just Chris would be fine, sir.” To his credit, Chris seems just as surprised as everyone else to be singled out and Yuri hears Victor let out a quiet huff of air at his side that lets Yuri know that once again he had not been expecting this twist and he was not entirely happy about it. “I can’t say that I was able to give it a thorough reading, but that doesn’t matter much to me. I never make it a habit to believe everything I read in the magazines. I’d rather trust my own ability to make conclusions for myself.”

“And have you come to any conclusions?” Morooka pressed.

“Mr. Morooka, I don’t think…” Whatever Victor was trying to say in order to draw matters back on track was lost when Chris grinned and waved a hand to stop him.

“It’s fine, Your Highness.” Any lingering surprise or unease had been completely wiped from Chris expression and he looked exactly like his typical relaxed self as he went on. “My conclusion is that someone tried very hard to make Yuri look bad. And when I say that, I mean it. Yuri is _not_ the kind of person to try to play dirty tricks to get ahead.”

“Chris is right.” Phichit piped in from his spot on Chris’ left side. “Whoever did this had to resort to
dishonest tactics like doctored time stamps to try and ruin Yuri’s reputation. Even if I didn’t know Yuri as well as I do, I still wouldn’t believe this. It reeks of desperation.”

There were a few murmurs of agreement down the line. Several men even nodded their heads.

“Every one of you agrees?” Morooka sounds surprised. That makes two of them. Yuri hadn’t thought the others would even be asked to give an opinion, and, once he’d realized they would be, he never would have hoped they would all leap to his defense. “Surely one or two of you must have some suspicions?”

“I think we’d have been more suspicions if it had been me up there.” JJ was leaning back in his chair, arm propped up along the back of the seat and legs crossed. “I don’t see Yuri ever breaking any laws, but I can’t say I wouldn’t have been tempted.”

That comment garnered some laughter. Yuri even noticed tight smiles pass across the king and queen’s faces and Yurio was hiding his mouth behind his hand, probably not wanting to give JJ the satisfaction of knowing he was laughing at the man’s joke.

“Speaking of…” Morooka turned back to Yuri and Victor now. “Are we right to assume there has been a full inquiry into this matter?”

“Naturally. We didn’t want the shadow of doubt hanging over either of us any longer than it needed to be.” Victor explained.

“Oh, I’m sure no one really had much thought about any misconduct on your part, Your Highness…”

“If there is anyone out there that is accusing Yuri, they are accusing me as well. I don’t exactly have any personal experience in this area, but I do know enough to understand it typically takes a minimum of two people to break that particular law. Logically speaking, that is. Besides, no one should be above reproach. Not even myself.” Victor’s tone is polite, but only a few degrees above icy. “Those who were involved in the photo leak have already been dismissed and dealt with and a special prosecutor has already gone over all the evidence and has declined to press charges against either Yuri or myself.”

Morooka hesitated for a moment, obviously aware he had overstepped a boundary and trying to determine what, if anything, he could do to fix it.
You have been vocal about this law in the past, Your Highness. This incident hasn’t changed your stance on the issue, has it?” Victor shook his head firmly and Morooka focused in on Yuri now and he forced himself to sit still and remain calm. “Yuri, what do you think? Do you agree with the prince that the law prohibiting extra-marital sex should be abolished?”

Yuri felt blindsided again. No one had said he was supposed to have a political opinion. He was supposed to just be telling his side of the story, letting people know that nothing illegal had happened between himself and the prince and then moving on with his life. He wasn’t ready for this.

Not that he didn’t have his own beliefs on the issue at hand. He just wasn’t sure if his ideas were the right ones. The ones the people would want to hear, or the ones the royal family would endorse.

But Lilia had told him to find a story he wanted to tell, and Georgi hadn’t been wrong in his advice for Yuri to tell at least a part of the truth. He didn’t want to lie or demur to blindly support Victor’s stance. He had his own voice. It was far and away time he should start to use it.

“I think it can be very problematic at times.” Yuri took a deep breath and forced himself to continue even though he felt the weight of every pair of eyes in the studio pressing down on him in that one moment. “For one, I have to admit that it can be fairly difficult to prove in certain cases. For another, it does tend to carry a harsher penalty for those who are in lower castes and don’t have enough money to mount a proper defense or find a way to sweep the scandal under the rug. A conviction is an automatic sentence of being re-caste as an Eight. Something that disproportionately happens to young mothers in lower castes. Women who already don’t necessarily have the financial support for a baby end up being stripped of everything and left out at the bottom. I… I don’t know if the law should be abolished completely. I’m not going to pretend I know much at all about the politics of having it revoked in its entirety… But surely there is a way to amend it. Adjust it so that it could be more fair to everyone?”

Yuri stopped speaking and waited, not sure what was going to happen now. Not sure if he’d just stuck his foot in his mouth for the last time.

He wasn’t sure of anything until Victor reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it hard. Yuri allowed himself to smile and squeeze back. He knew what the gesture meant without having to ask. No matter what everyone else thought, Victor was proud of him.

“Very eloquently put!” Morooka clasped his hands together and leant forward. “Is this a cause we can expect you to champion if you were to become the Royal Consort?”
“Oh?” Yuri blinked a few times before allowing Victor’s hand in his to steady him again. “I actually haven’t thought about that much. It’s honestly barely sunk in that I’m in the Elite….”

“It was a rather quick development, wasn’t it?” Victor asked casually, effectively bringing the interview back into his court. “Perhaps that is something they can work on this month. Researching what causes they would like to champion in the future. Of course, we will also be up to our ears preparing for the Britannians arrival…”

And Victor went on from there, chatting easily back and forth with Morooka again, keeping the other man on topic and eating up the last five minutes of the broadcast.

If anyone noticed Victor hadn’t dropped his hand, they didn’t say anything and Yuri didn’t pull away.

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“See? That wasn’t so bad.” Minako said as she perched on the edge of Yuri’s desk, hands busy pairing some of Yuri’s socks to be stowed away in their proper place. Dinner had flown by in a blur and Yuri had begged off any after meal activities with the excuse that he still wasn’t feeling back to one hundred percent after so recently being ill. “We all knew you could do it.”

“I didn’t do much.” Yuri shrugged, pulling his legs up and wrapping his arms around his knees on his bed. “I barely said anything at all.”

“Sometimes that is more than enough.” Minako was quick to reassure him. She always was. Yuri wasn’t sure what he would have done without her brand of stern but constant support. “We’ll know more once the ratings come in, of course. The king has already agreed to give the ten of you clearance to that information if you want it.”

“Oh…”

And there was another thing. Yuri was going to have access now. He was going to be able to know things he never would have been able to know before. He was going to be expected to formulate opinions on those things and he was going to be expected to deliver those opinions at the drop of a hat and presumably without turning into a useless statue whenever someone asked him a question he hadn’t been anticipating.
He wasn’t going to be expected to just sit there and take up space any longer.

“Yuri, I can practically hear your gears crunching into motion from here.” Minako placed aside her bundle of socks and positioned her hands firmly on her hips as she stared him down from across the room. “I’ve already told you a million times that you think too much.”

“Well, now you’ve told me a million and one.” Yuri grumbled, burying his chin in the divot between his knees and chewing on the inside of his cheek. “I can’t help it. Trust me, if I could, I would.”

“Are you worried about the interview?” Minako asked and Yuri shook his head. The interview had started the cascade of his thoughts, that much was true, but it was no longer the dominant event in his brain at the moment. “If it’s not that, then what is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s a lot of things, I guess.” Yuri shrugged again. “It’s… I just… Minako, why am I still here? Really?”

“You’d need to ask Victor that question. I’m not a mind reader.” Minako popped up to her feet now and moved to the side of the bed to loom over him. “Hmmm… Could it be that you are too scared to know the answer?”

“I…” Yuri gulped and swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“You shouldn’t be.” Minako fires back as though she’d had the response locked and loaded for days now, just waiting for the perfect moment to shoot it at him. “He doesn’t even try to keep it a secret that you’re the only one he looks at.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Yuri shook his head as though he was trying to stop her words from reaching him entirely. “There are nine other men he’s looking at when he isn’t looking at me. I know it shouldn’t bother me. I know it’s all part of the process… I just… I just didn’t think it would be so hard.”

“Oh, Yuri.” Minako sighed as she reached out and ruffled his hair before he could duck out of the way. “You are just so frustratingly stupid sometimes.”

“I… What?” Yuri sputters and stumbles and tries to find words again, but this time ends up with nothing more than an awkward squeaking noise for the attempt.
“Talk to him. Ask him to tell you the truth. He’ll do it.” Minako sighs and ruffles his hair again.

“He loves you, Yuri. He loves you so much the whole world can see it. Everyone but you.”
Whew, this chapter just kept kind of growing out of control on me... And since I'm again posting this in the wee hours of the morning, I will start responding to comments tomorrow! Just know I love each and every one of you and every time I look at the bottom of a chapter and see the comment count I literally go speechless for a full minute. ^_^ 

I know I may have mentioned that we're going to get a bit more of an insight into Victor's thoughts as far as how the Selection has been progressing, but I've pushed that back to the next chapter. Trust me, it'll be worth it. I promise!

In other news... Some people have expressed my posting maybe a one shot or two from Victor's POV. So, I've thought about that and I was wondering... Instead of a few one shots, would anyone be interested in a companion piece from Victor's POV to fill in some of the blanks Yuri might not have been privy to? If there's any interest just let me know! I have plenty of material laying around that I've trimmed and cut from the main story!

Alrighty then. How about some Otabeck? And maybe some Mari???

Chapter Thirteen – Reconnection

Yuri allowed a week to go by and then another. He knew he was being a coward again. Knew there was going to come a time when he was going to have to grab the metaphorical bull by the horns and actually talk to Victor, but he wasn’t ready. He wasn’t sure when he would be. He wasn't even entirely sure he could be.

Even Minako had mostly given up on trying to force him. For the most part all she would do when he came back to his room to turn in for the evening was give him a sad look and a tight sigh, but she didn’t push him any further. Yuri wasn’t sure if he was grateful or annoyed by the respectful distance she gave him.

He was frustrated with himself for feeling that way, too. He shouldn’t need to be pushed. He was twenty-two years old. An adult. A grown adult who’d had his own career at one point. Someone who had managed to get up the courage to move across the entire country and live on his own for five years without anything more solid than whispered promises of potential success. Compared to that, this should be easy.

It should be, but it wasn’t.
It didn’t help that Victor again became all but completely inaccessible once more as he was locked away in meeting after meeting. Not that Yuri thought it would really stop the other man from seeing him if he asked…

But he didn’t ask and two weeks went by with no resolution to Minako’s unsolicited revelation.

To be fair, he was far busier than he had been before. Not only were they expected to keep up their current schedule of daily lessons, they were now required to sit in on meetings with the queen in regards to planning the ball in August as well as several minor functions that would be thrown to entertain their foreign guests. If he thought having to come up with a political opinion was bad, he had severely underestimated the stress of filling out a seating chart in a way that didn't put two people who might not like each other too close together.

Especially since he barely knew the people he was supposed to be seating.

And when he wasn’t in some kind of lesson or sorting through endless piles of swatches in an effort to find the right pattern for a tablecloth to pair with the fine china that didn’t make the muscle at the base of Queen Lilia’s eye twitch, he was at the dance studio. Sometimes he was there to dance by himself. Sometimes he would meet Yurio there and continue their fencing practice.

Today was one of the days with Yurio, and, surprisingly, Otabeck.

That had never happened before. For whatever reason, Otabeck had never shadowed Yurio to the dance studio before, even though if Yurio was anywhere else the dark haired man was always a step or two behind. He was here today, though, with only a mumbled explanation from Yurio about wanting to test out what he’d been practicing on someone else for a change.

“I don’t understand how any of you manage to sit in on those party planning sessions without wanting to break something.” Yurio was rummaging around through the closet that held the fencing equipment as Yuri was stretching at the barre. Otabeck was off to the side, quiet as usual, running through a set of his own stretches. “Or throwing up. Does intense boredom make you vomit? I’ll bet it does.”

“To the best of my knowledge no one has vomited from prolonged boredom in any of our meeting or lessons, but I’ll keep you posted in case it does.” Yuri responded drily. Yuri had been in a mood for weeks now. If Yuri cared to, he was sure it traced back to the magazine article and corresponding debacle. Of course, Yurio had never said anything about it, so Yuri was mostly guessing his fouler
than usual mood had something to do with that. “What do they have you doing?”

“Nothing.” Yurio stepped back from the closet and kicked the door closed with a loud bang, dumping the armful of equipment he has dug out onto one of the blue mats and dropping down to the floor in a huff. “My main duty is to stay quiet and out of the way. It’s fucking stupid, but it gets me out of some of my tutoring since Lilia is too busy to come looking for me whenever I don’t show up for a session. I still can’t wait for this stupid shit to be over, though.”

“Isn’t someone going to notice eventually if you keep skipping lessons?” Yuri asked.

“Only if Beka tattles on me.” Yurio shot a fierce glare at where Otabeck was currently stretched out into a lunge position. “My tutors are too fucking scared of me to say anything. I honestly think they’re happier than I am when I don’t show up.”

“I won’t say anything.” Yuri almost jumped as Otabeck spoke up, still more focused on what he was doing and not even looking in their direction.

“I know you won’t.” Yurio scoffed. “I was just making conversation.”

“Right…” Yuri straightened up and raised his left arm over his head, sticking his left leg out to the side and lifting it up and down slowly while resting the tips of his fingers against the barre just in case. “You just told me your secret. How do you know I won’t be the one that tattles?”

“Because if you did, you’d be showing everyone your best impression of a being a red smear on the floor before you even had a chance to blink.” Yurio warned, though Yuri did notice there was an odd lack of his usual venom behind the words. “Don’t think that being one of the few people I manage to barely tolerate makes you fucking special.”

“I would never take your tolerance for granted. I promise.” Yuri knew he wasn’t hiding the fact that he was teasing very well at all, but it didn’t seem to matter as Yurio simply grunted and frowned, but didn’t say anything further or start throwing things. Yuri took that as a good sign.

“Alright. Are we going to do this or what?” Yurio bounced to his feet, clearly not in the mood to continue stretching. Instead of tossing Yuri the gear like he’d been expecting, Yurio kicks some pads over towards Otabeck. “Come on, Beka. I know you’ve been slacking off on practice time running errands for my halfwit of a brother. Let’s see how rusty you are.”
“You don’t know I haven’t been practicing.” Otabeck rose up out of his lunge and Yuri watched with no small amount of confusion as the other man began shrugging into the padding he’d been provided. “I’m not going to go easy on you either.”

“I didn’t think you would.” Yurio had that feral, competitive grin he got when someone had issued a challenge and Yuri lowered his leg to the floor and pushed off the barre, turning around and resting his back against it in order to get a better view. “Today is the today I’m going to wipe the floor with your sorry ass. Just wait and see.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” There was a flicker of something that looked an awful lot like a smirk cross Otebeck’s lip before his face was hidden behind the silver mesh of a facemask.

Apparently, this was going to be a much more raucous bout than anything Yurio had done with him as the blonde teen also donned his own mask, causally tossing a blunted foil towards Otabeck, the other man plucking the hilt out of the air quickly and efficiently.

“What do you want me to do?” Yuri asked, hoping that didn’t sound as awkward as he felt. He hadn’t exactly thought through what was going to happen when three people showed up to participate in a sport that was usually relegated to two players.

“Watch us.” Yurio offered up a one shouldered shrug before swiping his blade through the air before adjusting his grip on the hilt. “Take mental notes. See where I can improve… I guess you can watch Beka, too, if you want. I’m sure he’ll have plenty of places for improvement.”

“I’ll do what I can…” Yuri was sure that Yurio didn’t need to be reminded that he wasn’t exactly an expert in fencing. Aside from ballet, he wasn’t really an expert in much of anything.

“You don’t have to go into too much detail. Some of it will be obvious.” Otabeck had shuffled over to the center of the floor and waited until Yurio moved to the opposite side before taking a few practice wings of his own. “Watch his left side. He tends to leave it glaringly open when he gets too focused on attack instead of defense.”

“I do not!” Yurio shouts and with a quick clink of their blades together and a stiff bow, they’re off.

Yuri knew enough to understand that he wasn’t terrible at fencing. He’d even gotten better in all the weeks he’d spent trading blows with Yurio, but it wasn’t until this very moment that he understood how big of a difference there really was between ‘not terrible’ and ‘holy shit, that is amazing’.
It was like Yurio and Otabeck knew where the other was going to strike before they themselves even knew. The blades flashed in the morning light blaring through the massive studio windows and Yuri was getting dizzy trying to track their progress as the sounds of metal on metal and the sporadic grunting and cursing from the two combatants filled the room. Yuri was mesmerized as he watched the silver blades whip through the air in a blur.

Yurio’s style was aggressive, though, in retrospect, Yuri probably should have seen that coming. The smaller teen pushed every advantage he could find, twisting his body in impossible ways to avoid allowing Otabeck through his guard in order to land any blows, while always striking out at any opening he could find. There wasn’t a second when his body wasn’t still.

Otabeck, on the other hand, stayed staunchly on defense. He would let Yurio press and press, stoically refusing to give even the barest of millimeters in the face of Yurio’s intense onslaught. Then, lightning quick, his blade would flash out and Yurio would have to lurch back to narrowly avoid giving Otabeck the first touch.

They went back and forth for about five minutes before Yurio wove through a miniscule chink in Otabeck’s defense and scored the first point.

The smaller teen whooped and they took a few steps back, crossing their blades once more before setting off again. If anything, more brutal than before.

Yurio might have gotten the first point, but it certainly wasn’t the last and it was clear out of the two of them which one had more stamina. Neither faded quickly by any means, but after another fifteen minutes the bout drew to an end with Otabeck outscoring the young prince by two points.

“Shit. I swear I almost had you for a minute there.” Yurio had pulled the mask off his face and chucked it into the corner of the room before leaning over to support himself with his hands on his knees while he tried to catch his breath. He blonde hair was drenched and his bangs were plastered to his forehead with strands falling out of his messy ponytail to stick to the nape of his neck. “How the fuck do you do that?”

“Discipline and about three years more practice than you happen to have.” Otabeck had removed his own mask, though he had tuck his under his arm instead of flinging it into the room. “You protected your left side better this time. You’re learning.”

“Not nearly quickly enough.” Yurio took a deep breath and straightened up, turning to Yuri as he did
“I think you’d do a bit better if you saved some energy for the second half of the bout.” Yuri might not know enough about the technical aspects of fencing, but he did know enough about performing, about pushing one’s body to its breaking point and then five steps further. “If you hadn’t emptied all your reserves in the first ten minutes, you might have been able to avoid letting your guard weaken towards the end.”

“He’s right.” Otabeck agreed calmly. “You could have won if you hadn’t tried to take me out in the first five minutes. This isn’t boxing. You aren’t aiming for a KO.”

“Tch.” Yurio tossed his head and frowned. “If I don’t push it now, I’m never going to get to the point where I don’t get tired.”

“Then I wouldn’t expect to beat me until you can.” Otabeck and Yuri watched with varying degrees of impassiveness as Yurio cursed under his breath and stalked over to the equipment closet, tugging off the rest of his gear and shoving it back into place. “You are supposed to meet your stepmother for tea before lunch. She’ll be expecting you in half an hour.”

“Fuck, I forgot. I’m going back to my room.” Equipment stored, Yurio slipped back into his trainers and stomped his way over to the exit, turning and shooting Otabeck a warning glare. “And don’t fucking follow me. I don’t need your assistance to shower.”

The door slammed shut behind him, leaving both Yuri and Otabeck wrapped in awkward silence.

“He doesn’t like to lose.” Yuri almost jumped out of his skin as Otabeck spoke.

“I… I don’t think anyone does.” Yuri wasn’t sure what, if anything, he was supposed to say to that.

“True.” Now it was Otabeck’s turn to make his way to the storage closet and stow away his things. “He is getting better, though. Your influence, I would assume.”

“I don’t know about that. I’m really not all that good at it.” For once Yuri feels like he isn’t just saying that for the sake of being polite. Seeing the way Yurio and Otabeck had moved together had been than enough to show him exactly how lacking in skill he was in this particular discipline. “Now, if he had asked for dance lessons… That’s something I could really help with.”
“You’re making him think differently. He pushes too hard. You saw that today. Like as though he proves in the first five minutes of a round that he’s good enough to hold his own, then the rest of the match doesn’t matter… At least until the very end when he doesn’t have anything but pure spite left and he finds out he’s lost by a point or two.” Equipment stored, Otabeck closes the closet door and turns to Yuri, dark eyes as inscrutable as ever. “Now, though, there’s something else. He’s thinking through his steps, his motions. He’s not just raging at a brick wall hoping to look back when he’s done to see a dent. You did that.”

Yuri didn’t know what to say to that. He wasn’t entirely sure how his clumsy fumbling had managed to impart anything onto Yurio’s already impressive skill set, but if Otabeck saw a difference… Well, who was he to argue with something who actually knew what they were doing?

Instead of further protest, which he had a sneaking suspicion would only be met with stoic silence, he decided to change the subject.

“How long have you been Yurio’s guard, if you don’t mind my asking?” He wasn’t sure if Otabeck would answer, or if he even wanted to hang around talking. Yuri was sure he had plenty of duties to attend to even when Yurio didn’t require his presence. Everyone seemed to. They were always running around through the palace looking as though they were on their way to something important.

“Not long. Since mid-November, I think. Are you going to need more floor space?” Otabeck asked and Yuri nodded, quickly hurrying to help the guard move some of the mats that had been drug out across the floor and back into the corner of the room where they belonged. “I graduated from the military academy when I was seventeen and they approached me then to go into a year long training to join the royal guard. Once I was done with that… Well, I ended up here.”

“Oh.” Yuri wasn’t sure exactly what he’d been expecting, but, then again, he almost hadn’t expected an answer at all. “Do you… Do you like it?”

“Yes.” Otabeck offered up a one shoulder shrug to that. “It’s gone better than expected. Apparently, I’m the first guard Prince Yurio hasn’t managed to toss into the fountain. And he’s more or less stopped trying to escape me when I’m required to tail him. Mostly.”

“I’m sure there’s still plenty of time for him to get you in the fountain sooner or later.” Yuri dropped his end of the mat into place and ran a hand through his bangs, pushing them back out of his face. “I didn’t exactly know him before you, but I do have to say you’ve managed to wrangle him to most places more or less on time.”
“Speaking of, I really should go.” Otabeck brushed his hands off on his pants as he shoved the last mat into place. “If the prince is more than five minutes late to tea the queen will be upset.”

“Don’t let me hold you up. I’ll clean up anything else once I’m done.” Yuri waved as Otabeck nodded and made his way out the door.

As soon as he was gone Yuri felt his body sag in relief. He was getting better and better at handling Yurio and his moods and fits, but Otabeck was a mystery and Yuri still felt a bit on edge whenever he was around. It was almost as though the guard was watching his every move. Maybe even silently judging him.

Or Yuri could be letting everything get to his head a little too much. That he was now so worried about the eyes that he felt were constantly on him these days, he was seeing shadows where there weren’t any.

He shook his head in order to push those thoughts away. He had a full afternoon ahead and he needed to make the most of his time here while he could.

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Yuri sank down into his seat for lunch with about two minutes to spare before the start of the meal. Once he’d gotten going, it was always so easy for him to lose track of time and sometimes it was difficult to hear the alarm on his watch over the sound of the music when he was locked in his own, personal performance.

Luckily, Minako had figured out his schedule down to the second by now, including those times he might be running a minute or ten late, and she already had a bath drawn and waiting for him, along with a fresh set of clothes laid out on the bed. It hadn’t taken him long at all to wash off, and they had both also mastered the ability of Yuri getting ready while Minako danced around him with a cordless hair drier.

Yuri fingered the still slightly damp strands at the nape of his neck and silently prayed no one would notice as they all settled in to wait for their meals to be served.

Now that they were down to ten, Victor had declared it pointless to have them separated into two tables while he bounced from one to the other with each meal. At his request, a large, circular table had been procured and placed directly in front of the high table where King Yakov and Queen Lilia
staunchly remained for their own meals.

Another ‘fun’ idea put forward by the ever more cheerful prince, was to continue the precedent that had been set on their first appearance on The Report as the Elite of leaving name tents in their places in order to randomize the seating arrangements. It seemed fair enough to all of them. It spread out Victor’s attention and gave them all an opportunity to speak to people they usually wouldn’t have thought about sitting with.

Although, the random nature of the placings meant Yuri had yet to sit next to Victor even once somehow, though he’d been seated next to Yurio three times and had ended up sandwiched between Phichit and Chris at five meals so far.

It looked like today wasn’t going to be his lucky day as far as sitting next to the Crown Prince was concerned either as Victor plopped down into his seat directly across from Yuri and between Seung-Gil and Michele. Yuri himself had Guang Hong on his left and Leo on his right for this meal.

“Good afternoon!” Victor was his typical bright self. They had been seeing a lot more of this side of the prince in the past few weeks. It was as though now that he’d made it down to his top ten choices, Victor now felt comfortable enough to let more and more of his real self shine through. “What did they have you doing this morning?”

“We actually had the morning off for once.” Chris said in his own cheerful tone as they all started reaching out for rolls and moving around so servers could place plates of food in front of them. “I think most of us slept in. How was your morning?”

“I definitely did not get a chance to sleep in, that’s for sure.” Victor chuckled lightly as he reached out for the glass of water in front of him. “Father and I were in meetings for most of the morning. Boring ones. As soon as this upcoming royal visit has come and passed, you’ll all get the chance to see exactly how exciting budget meetings really are. I expect at least seven of you will run for the hills at that point, regardless of how appealing my charms are.”

“If we haven’t run off yet, I don’t think you’re in any danger of us doing so now.” Yuri stated simply as he cut into his baked chicken. “Trust me, we’ve had plenty of boring lessons.”

“I don’t know. There’s just something about listening to people read complex numbers by rote that tends to send people running. Or sleeping.” Now Victor sent a pointed look across the way to his half-brother. “Or flipping tables over.”
“You flip over one or two tables and suddenly that’s all anyone will ever talk about.” Yurio grumbled, but Yuri had to admit he didn’t seem upset at all about the accusation. “I was twelve when that happened. What kind of person thinks that a budget meeting is the appropriate place for a fucking twelve year old?”

“You know, most people manage to show they aren’t pleased with a situation without resorting to destroying furniture.” Phichit pointed out, ignoring the glare that was sent his way at his statement. “We might have had a light morning, but we’re in for a busy afternoon. We’re even booked past dinner.”

“Wait. They were serious when they said we’re going to have dancing lessons after dinner?” JJ looked truly surprised. “I thought Celestino was joking about that.”

“He wasn’t joking. I don’t think they joke about things like that around here.” Leo sighed heavily as he swiped a pad of butter across his roll. “At least we can go straight to bed from there. My aching feet will thank me for it.”

“Your aching feet?” Guang Hong asked, leaning forward a bit to see around Yuri. “More like your partner’s aching feet. I think mine are still bruised from the other day.”

“I’m getting better!” Leo shot back. “I am getting better, right?”

“You’re definitely getting better.” Chris was quick to reassure the other man, and reached out to give him a solid pat on the back as well. “Here, why don’t I be your partner tonight? I don’t think you’ve stepped on my feet yet.”

“That’s because he hasn’t danced with you yet.” Phichit pointed out and the whole table laughed even as Leo turned red and mumbled into his salad.

This felt better. Yuri was coming to like this part of his day more and more. When they were on their own or in lessons or meetings, Yuri found he still gravitated towards Phichit, Leo, and Chris, but during mealtimes he found that he was coming to like the way the conversation flowed easily between all of them.

It didn’t hurt that this was one of the few guaranteed times per days when he would see Victor.
He might still be a coward when it came to talking to Victor on his own, but Yuri found himself craving the prince’s presence none the less. Even if it came at the price of an entire table’s worth of space between them.

There was something about the way Victor’s blue eyes would always seem to seek him out the second he stepped into the room, or the way Yuri would do the same. It was the way Victor would smile at him when he was sure no one else was looking. The slight downward twist of his lips when he would look at the way the name tents were arranged on the table and realize they still were not positioned next to each other.

How when Victor would tell a joke or a story he would always look to Yuri first to gauge his reaction before allowing his gaze to sweep around the rest of the table. Or perhaps it was how whenever Yuri spoke, Victor listened with rapt attention, sometimes even missing what his partner next to him was saying in order to not miss Yuri’s input even it didn’t have anything to do with the prince’s conversation at all.

Yuri knew what Minako would have said about it. He was sure he knew what his friends would have said about it, too, but they were all respecting his obvious desire not to talk too much about the prince as well.

Even Victor himself was giving Yuri space. Waiting for him to make up his own mind. Even as it was driving Yuri crazy, he was grateful for it all the same. It would be too easy for Victor to come to him, to convince him with his enthusiasm and soft words that everything Minako had said was true and then some, but Yuri didn’t want that.

He didn’t know what he wanted, not really, but the one thing he was sure of was that the discussion he needed to have with Victor had to come from him and from no one else.

Now if only he could figure out exactly what he wanted to do.

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Dinner came and went and so did their evening dance practice, and Yuri was still at a loss. He knew this had gone on long enough. He knew that he was being immature and, as Minako would have said, insufferably stupid.

Honestly, if he couldn’t get it together long enough to have a fifteen minute conversation alone with
Victor then he definitely didn’t deserve to be there.

More than that, even. If he couldn’t bring himself to have this conversation then Yuri didn’t deserve Victor.

Yuri was tempted to take a walk once practice was done, but he’d already overdone it that day. Dancing in the morning, lessons in the afternoon and then more dancing again in the evening had left his mind numb and his muscles sore. There had once been a time when Yuri wouldn’t have even blinked at rehearsals or private lessons in the morning and then a full performance in the afternoon and another in the evening with nothing more than some fruit and grilled fish in his stomach, but his body was definitely feeling his lack of regular intense exercise and the inclusion of richer foods into his diet.

Right then, the only thing Yuri wanted was a long soak in hot water and his soft bed immediately thereafter. He wasn’t naïve enough to think that he was going to be able to drift off to sleep without spending an hour or so staring at the ceiling while his thoughts whirred through his mind on an infinite loop, but the sooner he got that out of the way, the sooner he would be able to sleep.

As soon as he opened the door and stepped into his room, he knew that his plans for the evening weren’t going to happen.

“I don’t think he has any plans for the evening. I’m sure he’ll be here soon… Ah! There he is!” Minako was holding a mobile phone to her ear and her expression brightened as she turned and caught sight of Yuri hovering in the open doorway. “Yuri! I was just about to come find you. Your family is on the phone.”

“M-My family?” Yuri hurried forward, hand held out to take the phone from Minako. He had been exchanging letters with his family almost every other day, but he couldn’t recall them ever sending him anything that made him think there might be something wrong. He knew they had a number to reach him if there was an emergency and a million scenarios ran through his mind for what might be waiting for him on the other end of the line. “Thank you, Minako… I think… I think I should take this call alone.”

“Of course.” Minako didn’t seem concerned or upset as she handed over the requested device and inclined her head in his direction before leaving him to himself.

Yuri waited for the door to completely close behind her before reaching out and flicking the lock into place and pressing the phone’s speaker to his ear.
“Hello?”

“YURI!”

At the sound of his name being yelled out in triplicate in high pitched voices, Yuri pulled the phone away from his ear and winced. There were the sounds of three young girls still shrieking something on the other end of the line, but it was blessedly muted by the distance between Yuri’s ear and the speaker. Yuri squinted at the device in his hand, not quite sure exactly where the speaker phone function would be on a mobile device since he was only familiar with the corded landline he’d used at home and in the dorms, but he finally located a button on the screen with a picture of a speaker and pressed it, allowing the girls’ voices to increase in volume, but not deafen him at the same time.

“Axel! Lutz! Loop! Give him a chance to say something.” Underneath the girls’ excited babble, he heard Mari’s stern tone and there was a communal groan before the chatter stopped completely and the only thing he could hear was Mari. “Yuri? Are you still there?”

“Yes, yes I’m here.” Yuri hesitantly pulled the phone closer to his face, hoping that the initial outburst was well and truly done. “Mari, what’s going on? Is everything alright?”

“We should be asking you that question. We’ve been trying to call you for weeks. Ever since your interview with the prince.” Mari paused and then there was a slight gasp from her end of the line. “Oh! You don’t think we’re calling because something’s wrong here, do you?”

“Well, we were told the number they gave you was for emergencies only…” Yuri allowed some of the tension he’d been holding in his shoulders to flow out of him. Surely if there was something truly wrong, Mari would have already said so.

“This is an emergency!” One of the triplets must have wiggled her way back up to the receiver. “We were worried about you!”

“Worrying about Yuri is not an emergency, Loop. Now, hush, you’ll have a chance to talk to Yuri in a minute. We don’t want to startle him any more than we already have, now do we?” Mari said gently and there was some rustling in the background that must have been his sister pushing the girls away again. “We don’t care what the number was supposed to be for. We needed to talk to you. All of us. We needed to make sure you were okay.”
“I’m fine. I promise, I’m fine.” Yuri was having trouble wrapping his mind around what was happening. His family had called him, had been calling him, because they were worried. Because they thought he might need or want their support.

Until that very moment, he hadn’t even realized that was exactly what he needed.

“Hang on, Yuri. I’m going to put Mom on, okay?” Yuri made a noise in the affirmative and there was another shuffle from the other end before his mother’s voice came out of the speaker.

“Yuri? It’s really you this time, right?” His mother’s voice broke through the last dam Yuri had built and he sank down on his bed and set the phone on his knees, cradling his head in his hands and biting the inside of his cheek in order to stop himself from doing something utterly embarrassing like bawl like a baby just from hearing his mother say his name.

“Yes, Mom. It’s really me.” Yuri removed his glasses and placed them on the bed beside him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m fine, Mom. Everything is fine here.”

“Oh, thank goodness. Crown Prince Victor did say he was going to arrange it so that we could talk to you tonight, but when all we got was that sweet woman when we called… I was afraid something had come up and we were going to have to try again.” He could hear sadness in her voice, but it was clear she was happy, too. “You look so pale sometimes in the broadcasts. I can never tell if it’s just the lighting or not. And you looked so thin! Are they feeding you enough?”

“They are feeding us more than enough.” Yuri couldn’t help but laugh. His mother had always loved cooking when she had the time or they had the money to splurge on better ingredients. “You must have been watching old broadcasts. My attendant had to let out my slacks another few centimeters just the other day.”

“If you say so…” Yuri chuckled lightly. He had known he wasn’t going to be able to convince his mother than he was being fed right. She never had been one to believe that anyone other than herself would be able to properly nourish her children. He was sure it was the same with most mothers. “I wish I had known you were trying to reach me. Your letters never said…”

“I know, I know.” Yuri could picture her then, standing in their crowded kitchen, waving her hand in front of her as though to physically push away Yuri’s concern like it was nothing more substantial that a gnat. “We didn’t want to get you in trouble. We hoped that if you really needed us, you would be able to find a way to reach out, but your letters were always so pleasant… So we just kept trying in case we could get someone that we might be able to convince to go find you.”
“You said Victor was the one who arranged for you to get in touch with me?” Yuri asked, suddenly desperately needing to know the answer.

“Yes! The last time we called he must have been nearby, or else someone had told him we were calling every few days or so trying to get in contact with you and he came on the line himself.” If Yuri couldn’t hear the smile in his mother’s tone before, he definitely could now, and it brought a corresponding grin to his own face. “We only spoke for a few moments, but he sounded very nice. He even took a few minutes to talk to the triplets! And he immediately agreed to set up a time when we could call and actually reach you.”

“He is, Mom. Nice, I mean. He’s very nice and kind.” Yuri took a shaky breath as he tried to gather his emotions together into a tight ball instead of the loose mess they were currently arranged in. “He’s… He’s not at all what I expected.”

“Aren’t they ever?” Hiroko chuckled lightly and Yuri responded with a weak huff of laughter of his own. “He had nothing but good things to say about you. You can tell his thinks the world of you. The whole town is expecting an engagement announcement any day now!”

“Mom!” Even though there was no one in the room to see him, he still felt a blush rising up on his cheeks. “I’ve only been here for two and a half months and there are nine other men here with me. Don’t you think it’s too soon to be worrying about engagement announcements?”

“Of course, I’m just teasing you, dear.” Yuri got the feeling his mother was being more serious than she was admitting, but he didn’t call her out on it. The last thing he wanted to talk about with his mother was a hypothetical engagement to Victor. “You will give him our thanks the next time you see him, won’t you? He didn’t have to do this.”

“No, he didn’t, but I’m glad he did.” Yuri was glad. He was also about fifty other emotions, but elation was definitely one of them. “How is everyone there?”

“We’re doing very well. Your father just sold a proposal for another novel, so he’ll be wrapped up in that for the next few months. He’s at a meeting with his editor now, but he sends his love. I’ve mostly been keeping busy making a few odds and ends here and there, but Mari has a few works being featured in a gallery in Kent in a few weeks. The owner of the gallery thinks they’ll sell for their asking price or even more! Oh, and the triplets started dances lessons last week. They’re all determined to be prima ballerinas with the National Ballet by the time they turn ten…”
Yuri let his mother’s words wash over him as she brought him up to date with everything he had missed while he’d been away. Everything from the big to the mundane. From what Yuko and Takeshi were doing to how the mailman’s wife had just had twins. It calmed him some, knowing that beyond these walls life was going on. His family was safe and happy. His friends were the same. Even when he felt stuck in place, it always helped to know that somewhere out there, time was progressing the way it should.

Then it was the triplets turn. They were as loud and boisterous as ever and Yuri found himself fighting back tears for what must have been the thousandth time that evening alone. He had to fight off an intense wave of homesickness as they babbled on about their ballet lessons, describing the very studio where he had taken his first lessons so many years ago. He wished them all luck and promised to find a way to see them dance as soon as he could.

Finally, his sister was put back on the phone to give him their goodbyes.

“‘You would tell us, wouldn’t you? If there was anything wrong?’ Mari was trying to keep her tone level, but Yuri couldn’t help but hear her concern. She always had worried about him more than she let on. ‘I don’t care if he is the Crown Prince. If he’s treating you with anything less than the respect you deserve I’ll… Well, I don’t know what I’ll do, but it will probably end with me in jail for treason, I’m sure.’”

“I would tell you. He’s been a complete gentleman.” Yuri could feel his blush coming back, but he tried to fight down the urge to stammer out some kind of rebuttal. “Mari… It’s just you, right?”

“It’s just me.” Mari confirmed. “The others have gone into the living room. It’s just us, little brother.”

“It’s… Those pictures… Mari, I want you to know…”

“Whatever really happened up there is between you and the prince, Yuri. No one here cares so long as whatever it was is what you wanted to happen.” Mari paused then and Yuri listened to her even breathing on the other end of the line. “He didn’t… He didn’t take advantage of you, did he? I mean, we… We saw the interview, and we thought… We hoped…”

“He didn’t do anything I didn’t want.” Yuri was quick to reassure his sister. “And it… We didn’t lie. It didn’t go further than kissing. Neither of us are complete idiots.”

“That’s almost what I was afraid of.” Mari let out a soft sigh. “It sounds like you really like him.”
“I don’t know. I guess.” Yuri rolled his eyes as he heard his sister’s disbelieving huff on the other end. “I don’t know, Mari. I meant it when I told Mom he was different than what I expected. Victor… Well, he’s Victor. He can be sweet and kind and goofy. He loves his dog. He… He’s annoying and frustrating and sometimes he can have a big head, but he’s never mean or malicious. I just… I don’t know what to think half the time.”

“It sounds to me like you know exactly what you think.” Leave it to Mari to not let him off the hook. Maybe that was even why he’d said all he had. If there was anyone in the world that knew him and that he trusted to set him straight it was his older sister. “In fact, I think the only issue here is that you don’t want to admit it.”

“Damn it.” Yuri rubbed his hand over his forehead and bit back a heavy sigh. “I have to talk to him, don’t I?”

“If you haven’t already, I would definitely say ‘yes’.” He could hear the sound of clucking her tongue against her teeth. “Yuri… This is a weird situation, isn’t it?”

“You’re telling me.”

“Just… Just remember that whatever you decide, or whatever he decides, we’re going to be here for you. You will always have us, okay?” Mari paused again and this time Yuri could hear the rest of his family talking again in the background. “I have to go, but don’t forget that, little brother. No matter where you are or what you want to do, we’re here.”

“Thank you, Mari.” Yuri said and he meant it. “I miss all of you.”

“We miss you, too. It’s weird. We get letters from you and we read them in front of the television while we watch specials about how you spent your day and who you were spending time with and how many dates you’ve been on with the prince to date.” They both laughed at that. “Whatever happens, don’t you dare come home with a swollen head. If you do, we’ll let the triplets hold you down and jump on you for a few hours. There’s nothing quite as humbling as having some six year olds bounce all over your kidneys.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that. This whole thing has been more than humbling enough.” Yuri ran a hand through his hair and rose to his feet. He glanced out the window and groaned at how dark it was. “I have to go, too. Most of the royal family will be gone tomorrow to attend some kind of charity event, but I promised some of the other men we’d use the free time to
work on their ballroom dancing. Some of them really need the work… But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“I didn’t hear it from you.” Mari echoed, although there was a hint of amusement in her tone that said she wasn’t going to be forgetting his admission any time soon. “Goodnight, Yuri. And please be careful, okay?”

“Goodnight. And I will.” Yuri didn’t want to hang up. He wanted to stay on the phone all night, but he knew he couldn’t. “Tell Mom and Dad and the triplets that I miss them, too. Yuko and Takeshi, too.”

“I will.”

Yuri hung up and cradled the phone to his chest for a moment, eyes closed and mind calm for the first time in weeks.

He knew what he needed to do now. What he needed to say. He was tempted to ring for Minako and have her see if Victor was available right then and there, but a quick glance at the clock on his bedside table stopped him. He had been talking with his family for over an hour and he hadn’t been lying about having an early day. They were all expected to be in the grand foyer to see the royal family off bright and early.

Tomorrow, then. If Victor wasn’t too tired from whatever charity event he was having to attend.

He was going to talk to Victor tomorrow. No matter what.

His mind made up, Yuri went through his nightly routine.

For the first time since the magazine article had come out, he was asleep before his head even hit the pillow.
Whew. This chapter turned out to be a monster to write, and I apologize for the slight delay in getting it up (aside from this being the largest chapter so far, my sister came into town a few days ago and is staying with me until she goes home next week so I've been a bit busy).

I've also updated my AO3 profile to include the URL for my tumblr. I don't tend to post a ton, but I do reblog a lot of Yuri on Ice stuff and I'm constantly lurking around on there. ^_^

Finally, we are ready to have Yuri and Victor reconnect again. As, always, enjoy!

Chapter Fourteen – Breathe

When Yuri woke up the next morning he half expected the calm determination from the night before to have changed, but, for once, it hadn’t waned in the slightest. It was like now that he’d made up his mind, there wasn’t going to be any going back.

Minako seemed to notice his changed mood, but she didn’t comment. She merely winked at him and took back the mobile phone he’d left on his bedside table and went on to help him get ready for the day without a word.

Yuri’s good mood intensified when he stepped into the dining hall for breakfast and found Victor’s name tent placed right next to his for the first time since they’d moved all the tables together.

Yuri never had been a morning person, and he was one of the last to arrive for the meal, only JJ, who was somehow even worse of a morning person that Yuri was, and Victor himself missing as Yuri took his seat.

“Good morning, everyone!” Yuri twisted in his seat and couldn’t hold back an excited grin from splashing across his face as Victor greeted the table and slipped into his seat at Yuri’s left side. He was rewarded by a bright smile in return, Victor’s blue eyes lighting up as he looked over at Yuri. Victor lowered his voice as he settled into place. “Good morning, Yuri.”

“Good morning.” Yuri returned the greeting happily, trying desperately not to flush as he always did
when Victor narrowed his eyes slightly and the smile on his lips tweaked more into a smirk. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did, though I have to admit I was up far earlier than I would like going over last minute preparations for the event today.” Victor said cheerfully as he reached out for the mug of tea a servant had set in front of him. “Yourself?”

“I slept much better than I have been.” Yuri leaned forward, dropping his voice low enough that he hoped no one else would be able to hear him over the din of everyone sorting out their meals and greeting each other. “Thank you.”

Victor raised a silver eyebrow and placed the tip of his index finger on his lips for a brief second. “I can’t imagine what you would be thanking me for, but if there was something, I would have to say it was no problem at all.”

“Thank you for being you.” Yuri offered up with a shrug, not missing the strange glint in Victor’s eyes as he registered Yuri’s words. Vaguely aware of Phichit now looking at them curiously from the right side of the table, Yuri raised his voice to a more normal level. “So, where exactly are you going to be today?”

“A library. Downtown.” Victor, catching onto the fact that there are more curious eyes on them than usual, turns his body back towards the table. “They’re opening a new educational wing for children of those in lower castes. It’ll be a day camp in the summer and during the school year they’ll have some after school programs so parents know their kids have a safe place to be in case they’re at work and can’t be home for them immediately.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea.” Seung-Gil, who was usually fairly quiet, spoke up from his end of the table. “Do they have any programs already in mind?”

“A few, from what I’ve been able to gather.” Victor had completely turned away from Yuri by this point, but underneath the edge of the tablecloth, Yuri felt their knees touch. Neither one moved them away. “Most of them are centered on reading and writing, but there are a few science and art classes being worked in.”

“How are you finding teachers to support that?” Emil asked. He was seated directly to Yuri’s right so Yuri ducked his head down a bit under the guise of reaching for the bowl of sugar to spoon onto his oatmeal in order for Emil to see Victor better. “Are you offering a salary or…”?
“It’ll be volunteers mostly, with one or two paid supervisors.” Victor explained. “The supervisors’ salary will come out of some funds the Crown has set aside for programs such as these. It’s part time work, but the applicants have been promising. Dedicated, hardworking. Father vetted them himself.”

“It sounds great, but is it just going to be one library in Angeles?” Phichit was the next one to pipe in with a question. “I know several harried parents in Kent that would love to have a safe space to drop off their children.”

“Sounds to me like this could be an excellent pilot program for a nationwide expansion, don’t you think, Victor?” Chris was picking at a muffin on his plate absentmindedly, but his attention was obviously fully on the conversation at hand instead of his breakfast.

“I suppose we’ll have to see.” Victor answered lightly.

“Are you excited about getting to go out into the city?” Yuri wasn’t sure why he felt the need to ask that question, but it had been bothering him for longer than he was willing to admit. The way none of the royal family seemed intent on leaving the palace unless they absolutely had to.

“Of course!” Victor had turned the full force of his smile back in Yuri’s direction and Yuri felt the prince’s knee press a bit harder against his own under the table. Yuri pressed back without thinking anything beyond the need to reassure Victor that he was there and not exactly shying away from the prince’s touch. “It’s been ages since I’ve had a chance to go out into the city.”

“Too bad it’s for something lame and boring.” Yurio was more or less content to sulk in silence during most meals unless someone, usually Yuri, spoke to him directly. At his words about half the table jumped and looked over at the young prince hesitantly, as though they were trying to gauge whether he truly wanted a response or not before they risked giving one to him. “We won’t see much outside of the whatever is visible through the car window and I doubt the ceremony will last for more than an hour, tops. It’ll be boring as shit, too.”

“It’s still more than we’ll get to see.” Yuri pointed out, not quite registering his words until he realized he was now the center of attention. “What…? Oh! Oh, I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful…!”

“No, Yuri has a point. It’s been… What? Two and a half months since you’ve gotten here?” Victor asked, more to himself than anyone else. “I’m sure you’re all used to having more freedom than this, aren’t you?”
“Well… I wouldn’t mind getting a chance to look around Angeles some… even if it is just through a car window…” Leo spoke softly, almost as though he couldn’t believe he was saying anything at all.” I’ve never actually been too far from our home town before.”

“It’s been awhile since I’ve been in Angeles for any length of time.” JJ nudged Leo in the shoulder from his spot next to the other boy and shot his winning grin around the table. “I wouldn’t mind a chance to stretch my legs either. Do you think we could take a weekend on the town eventually, Victor?”

“I don’t see why you can’t come today.” Victor was tapping his chin with his finger thoughtfully. “It would be a good opportunity for all of you. Father!”

“What?” King Yakov grumbled from the high table, sending his eldest a warning glance over the heads of Chris and Michele who were seating directly in front of him. “Whatever it is, I’m sure I’m not going to like it and I’m sure the answer is going to be ‘no’.”

“Don’t be such a spoilsport, Father. You don’t even know what it is!” Victor didn’t seem the slightest bit put out by his father’s dour attitude as he pressed on. “What do you think about the Elite coming with us today? It might look good to have them all there, after all.”

The king grumbled something indecipherable into his coffee, but shared a glance with his wife before sighing and nodding his head once in Victor’s direction. “I’ll alert the staff and see if we can spare a few more guards for the trip. We’re leaving on time, though. If any of them are late, they stay behind.”

There was a sudden happy murmur that swept across the large table at the king’s words. In the ensuing commotion, Yuri impulsively let his hand reach out and grab Victor’s, squeezing the prince’s fingers quickly before letting go and reaching for his coffee.

He didn’t miss the look Victor sent him out of the corner of his eye, though. It was the kind of look that always sent a spark running up the length of his spine and Yuri didn’t even try to hide his pleased smile as he buried himself in his breakfast with a renewed intensity.

And when Victor bumped his knee against his underneath the table again, Yuri bumped back twice as hard, feeling the warmth of a flush he didn’t care to try and repress run up the back of his neck.

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There was a stampede to get upstairs as soon as the breakfast dishes were cleared. It seemed as though everyone wanted to give themselves plenty of time to get presentable and meet in the foyer with plenty of time to spare. Not a single one of them were willing to risk being left behind.

For the first time since arriving, Yuri found himself almost wishing he had allowed Minako to request another attendant to be assigned to him. He wasn’t sure if the extra pair of hands would truly help or merely hinder this late in the game after Minako and he had already gotten a consistent rhythm together, but as he had left the door to his room open, he couldn’t help but notice that the others were reappearing much faster than it was taking for him to change and make himself presentable.

“Contacts or glasses?” Minako called out from inside the bathroom as Yuri fumbled with the buttons on his crisp, blue shirt. He grunted in response, too focused on his own task to truly grasp that he was being asked a question. “Yuri! Contacts or glasses?”

“Huh?” Yuri looked up, registering the blurrier than usual surroundings. “Oh… Um… Contacts probably. I’m sure there will be cameras out there.”

“Okay, but I’m going to pack your glasses just in case your eyes get irritated on the way back.” Minako skipped out of the bathroom and handed Yuri his white contact case, hurrying over to the small messenger bag Yuri had decided to take with him for the day and grabbing his glasses from where he had tossed them on his bed as she went. “Hang on. Let me get the mirror.”

Yuri waited for her to return with a small hand mirror before twisting the cap off the side of the case that held his right lens and he set about seating them in his eyes as quickly as he could without poking himself in the process. “Do you think I should wear a tie?”

“No, it’s going to be hot enough out there without something strangling you.” Minako reached out and flicked at his bangs over the top of the mirror. “Speaking of, I should pack some extra gel in your bag as well. Just in case.”

“Do you think we’ll be gone long enough to really need it?” Yuri asked as slotted the last contact into place and handed Minako the empty case to stow away in his bag as well. “It’s only supposed to be a few hours.”

“You never know. It’s better to be prepared and not need something than to need something and not be prepared.” Minako paused and glanced around the room, Yuri’s bag hanging from one hand.
“Okay, let’s get you into the bathroom and get some light make-up on you and then I think you should be good to go… With plenty of time to spare, so stop looking at that clock like you think it’s the key to controlling time.”

Yuri followed along obediently. This still was not his favorite part of his pre-public appearance routine, but it was becoming more and more normal every time it occurred. Yuri didn’t even protest any longer when Minako applied some brown liner around his eyes, muttering something about the color bringing out the deeper tones of his irises.

“Okay. Perfect.” Minako pulled back and capped the gloss she’d just used, tossing it into a small make-up bag and shoving it inside Yuri’s messenger bag. “Tuck your shirt in and I think you’ll more than pass muster.”

Yuri complies with that last order quickly enough, running his hands over the front of his shirt as he does so in order to make sure there aren’t any wrinkles that have suddenly appeared. Minako gives him two thumbs up and they both hurry out of the bathroom, Yuri trying to stop himself from sprinting out into the hall, his anxiety half convinced he’s already been left behind even when his rational mind knows better.

“Yuri!” Phichit is just stepping out of his own room as Yuri rushes down the hall and he forces himself to slow down and fall into step with his friend. “Look at us. Rushing around like a bunch of elementary kids on their first field trip.”

“Field trip?” Yuri asked as they made their way down the stairs. He was sure he’d heard the term before, but he couldn’t quite place where.

“Like a school trip.” Phichit was looking at him curiously now. “You know, when they would take your whole class out away from school for a whole day and you’d like visit a museum or a park or something ostensibly educational?”

“Oh… Oh, I get it.” Yuri frowned as Phichit’s expression only become more intense. “Are you okay?”

“You’ve never been on a field trip before?”

“I’ve never been to a real school before.” Yuri shrugged, not entirely sure why something like that would matter. “There never seemed to be a point. Mom and Dad taught us all how to read and write
and do basic math, but other than that, there really wasn’t a need for us to go to a traditional school. Once I realized I wanted to dance, I threw myself into that. Why waste potential practice time or have to reschedule appointments or performances based on a school schedule?”

“You know, I sometimes forget you used to be a Five.” Phichit scratched at the nape of his neck for moment, his steps almost faltering before he caught himself.

“It’s fine. None of us really talk about our old castes much anymore.” Yuri pointed out. That much was true. The lines between them had blurred the longer they were together. Even JJ, who was always up for talking himself up in any given conversation, had stopped bringing up his caste up. “Did I really miss that much?”

“I don’t know… Probably not? To be honest, I only half paid attention in school. I always knew I was going to take over the family business one day. I figured the periodic table wouldn’t help me too much when it came to running a market.” Now it was Phichit who was shrugging.

“The periodic table?” Yuri wasn’t sure if that was something he was supposed to know about or not. Or if he should feel stupid for not knowing.

“Are you interested in chemistry in any way, shape, or form?” Phichit asked and Yuri shook his head. “Then you should be totally fine skipping that particular lesson.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Yuri still didn’t know if not attending traditional school was a good thing or not, but he pushed it out of his mind. Worrying about something he couldn’t change now wasn’t going to help him at all. “Come on, you can tell me all about the boring stuff I missed out on when we get back, okay?”

“Okay. Deal.”

Yuri nudged his shoulder against his friend’s and they exchanged reassuring smiles between them before returning to practically tripping over their own feet as Leo and Guang Hong pushed past them on their way to the foyer.

Yuri might not have ever been on a field trip before, but he was sure he was going to enjoy his time out in the city, no matter how little of it he was going to have.
As much as he enjoyed being outside somewhere that was not the palace gardens, Yuri had to admit Yurio had been right. The ceremony was boring.

And long. Or maybe it only felt long. Whoever had organized it had decided that it needed to be held outdoors, right in front of the new wing they were supposed to be opening. A wing that was on the east side of the building, directly under the harsh heat of the morning sun.

Mid-July was not the best time for standing in direct sunlight.

Yuri glanced around and noticed with grim satisfaction that he was not the only one that looked like they were melting. Chris had surreptitiously unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and Leo had taken a break in the speeches to pull his hair back into a short ponytail at the nape of his neck. Even JJ and Georgi who usually looked like they had just stepped off the set of a photoshoot were a little wilted around the edges, both of their hair more ruffled than usual and Georgi’s sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

Even Victor, who had always looked impeccable at formal events from what Yuri could remember, seemed to be feeling the strain from standing for an hour in the heat. His pale cheeks were pink and there was a sag to his shoulders that usually wasn’t there.

If asked, Yuri wasn’t sure he would be able to recount much of anything that was said in the many speeches that day. Not even if his life depended on it. He vaguely recalled King Yakov giving a speech about the importance of the youth of the country and Victor saying a few polite words to the organizers of the event. They all waved for the cameras and stood where they were told and Yuri recalled spending most of the last five minutes watching Yurio glower at anyone and anything that moved.

Then it was over and they were ushered into the foyer of the now open wing which was blessedly equipped with central air.

“Fuck. That was the longest hour of my life.” Yurio had tromped over to a group of chairs in the center of the room where the Elite were milling about waiting for their next direction. The young teen flopped down into the seat next to Yuri’s, not bothering with any type of greeting. “I feel like my entire face has melted off.”
“It looks more or less intact to me.” Yuri stated blandly as they both stared across the open space to where Victor and the king and queen were shaking hands and carrying on a quiet conversation with a few people who looked important. “Are summer events always like this?”

“No. This one was just a particularly poorly planned shitshow.” Yurio groaned and stretched his legs out in front of him. Yuri ached to do the same, but the manners that had been drilled into him for most of his life stopped him. “I don’t know why you lot wanted to come. I tried to warn you.”

“Next time I will definitely think about heeding that warning.” Even as Yuri said it, he knew it wasn’t true. He would stand in the sweltering sun for another hour if requested for the chance to be out in the city again, even if most of the view had been seen through a car window. “You know what would be perfect right now?”

“What?” Yurio perked up in his seat and turned to look at Yuri.

“Ice cream.”

“Huh… Yeah, that would actually be really fucking good right now.” Yurio pulled his right leg up underneath him and pushed his sweaty bangs off his forehead. “Too bad this is the grand opening for a library and not a fucking ice cream parlor. I feel like we don’t get invited to nearly enough of those.”

“How much longer do you think it’s going to be before they’re going to load us back up again?” Yuri asked, noticing that half of the others have wandered off to look at some displays down a long hall and the other half are seemingly engrossed in where a librarian is giving a brief lecture in a classroom off the main entrance.

“I wouldn’t think more than another fifteen minutes or so.” Yurio craned his neck so he could see the watch on Yuri’s left wrist. “Yeah. Fifteen minutes. Father never likes to linger for longer than he has to.”

“What are you two talking about?” Yuri looked up at the familiar voice to find that Victor was standing over them now, his previous conversation abandoned.

“Ice cream.” Yurio crossed his arms over his chest and gave his brother a mild glare.
“Ice cream?” Victor echoed, looking over to Yuri for further explanation as it seemed as though Yurio wasn’t going to be much help in that department.

“Yes. I was just saying that some ice cream would be wonderful right about now.” Yuri shrugged. “It’s too bad we’re leaving soon. There’s a place two blocks from here that has some of the best ice cream I’ve ever had.”

“How do you know that?” Yurio was now glaring in Yuri’s direction.

“Oh, I used to live in this area. I recognized some of the street signs from the car.” When neither Yurio nor Victor looked like they were going to say anything to that, Yuri went on. “The dorms for the National Ballet aren’t too far from here. On most of our off days some of us would like to walk around and do some exploring. There’s also a coffee shop not too far from here that has some amazing pastries that definitely weren’t on our meal plans, either. We’d sneak out and get some whenever we thought we could get away with it.”

“Hmmmm…” Victor was tapping his index finger against his lips in the gesture Yuri had quickly come to understand meant the prince was about to come up with some kind of ridiculous idea. “Then why don’t we go now?”

“You know damn well why we can’t go now, idiot.” Yurio ground out through clenched teeth. “No one is going to allow us to fuck off to an ice cream shop.”

“And we don’t have enough time to get there and back again before they’ll be looking for us to leave.” Yuri now felt bad for having mentioned it in the first place. He should have known better than to have said something when he had known there wasn’t a chance for following through. “Maybe some other time…”

“If we go now, no one will notice until it’s too late.” Without waiting for either Yuri or Yurio to put up another protest, Victor grabbed them both by the wrists and hauled them to their feet. “Come on! I have a phone. I can call for a car to pick us up once we’re done. Or do you both want to go back to the palace and your tutors and meetings and other duties?”

“Fuck no.” Yurio ripped his hand out of his brother’s grasp, but it was only so he could shoulder past the taller man and make a beeline towards the back of the building, sending furtive glances over his shoulder as he went.
“Yuri…” Victor drew out the ‘u’ in Yuri’s name and looked at him with the biggest set of deep blue puppy dog eyes he’d even seen. Yuri felt his resolve, not too terribly strong to begin with, crumble to dust. Sensing he’d won, Victor laced their hands together and pulled, Yuri stumbling along in his wake and trying to stifle his giggles in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Yuri could feel his heart beating in his ears as they hurried through some twisting back halls, neither one of them willing to slow down enough to risk a glance behind them to make sure they weren’t being followed. Their steps echoed through the empty halls and Yuri’s attention was split between Yurio’s blonde form jogging just ahead of them and Victor at his side, a brilliant smile stretched across his face and a sparkle in his eyes that Yuri loved seeing there.

They burst through a side door and out into warm sunlight outside. Yurio had paused, clearly unsure of the direction they should go and Yuri took a brief second to look the brothers over.

Victor’s hair practically glowed under the harsh light of the sun and Yurio wasn’t much better. They were both still in formal clothing, Yurio’s shirt unbuttoned at the top and the sleeves rolled up, but their pressed slacks and starched collars were going to stand out even without Victor and Yurio’s unique features. Yuri’s own clothing was in a similar state as well. They might as well walk around with neon signs above their heads proclaiming who they were in bold font.

“Which way?” Yurio was shifting his weight from foot to foot, arms crossed over his chest and an air of anxiousness about him. “Don’t just stand there like a fucking nitwit. Which way do we go?”

“Um… This way.” Yuri turned and took a few steps before pausing. “But first, we’re going to need to go somewhere else.”


“Follow me.”

~

“We’re not going back.”

Yuri had drug them to a clothing shop he knew of about a block or so away from the library that was smaller and often empty of customers at this time of day and they had hurried to find more normal
looking outfits as well as maybe a hat to hide Victor’s hair, but as soon as they had stepped out of the
dressing room area with their old clothes in their hands, they’d found a familiar face browsing idly
through the racks.

As soon as Yurio had seen Otabeck was there he’d stomped over, standing in front of the guard and
poking him hard in the chest, snarling and snapping and doing everything short of stomping his feet.

“I didn’t come here to take you back.” Otabeck stated calmly. “My duty is to watch you and make
sure nothing happens to you. No one said anything about forcing you to stay in one place while I did
that.”

Otabeck angled his body away from where Yurio was now sputtering in confusion, and he bowed
his head in Victor’s direction. “Your Highness.”

“Otabeck.” Victor inclined his head in return, and Yuri watched as the prince ran his calculating gaze
over the guard as though he was trying find an answer to a question no one had asked. This lasted
about ten seconds before Victor’s grin was firmly back in place. “We’re going incognito today so if
you would call me ‘Victor’?”

The guard nodded and looked at Yuri with an eyebrow raised.

“It was Victor’s idea, I promise.” Yuri waved his hands in front of him. “In fact, if anyone asks, I’ve
been kidnapped.”

“Yeah, Victor kidnapped both of us.” Yurio was quick to latch onto Yuri’s train of thought and they
both ignored Victor pouting in the background. “That’s a good story. Father will believe that one.”

“Unfortunately for me, you’re both right. Father would definitely believe this was all my fault.”
Victor sighed heavily and shoved his hands into the pockets of the jeans he was currently wearing.
“Fine, I’ll take the heat for this one even though it was Yuri’s idea.”

“I didn’t say go now.” Yuri wasn’t exactly sure what he’d been trying to do when he’d brought up
the ice cream parlor down the road. It had been some kind of weird cross between wanting to cheer
up Yurio and a walk down memory lane for himself. He should have known Victor would have
overreacted about it, though.
“Whatever it is you want to do, I would suggest doing it quickly. I might be the only one who saw you leave, but it isn’t going to take everyone else long to notice you’ve gone.” Otabeck had gone back to perusing the rack of clothing in front of him, studiously ignoring where Yurio was now jabbing at his shoulder with his index finger. “They’ll come looking eventually.”

“He’s right. They will. Let’s go buy these clothes and put some distance between us and them, shall we?” Victor sighed and nudged at Yuri to take the lead as they made their way to the front of the shop where a bored looking middle aged man was running the register.

“Hey, genius, how are we supposed to pay for these things?” Yurio asked as they stepped up to the counter, the man looking up from his magazine and doing what would have been a comical doubletake if Yuri had been in the mood to find anything remotely funny at the moment. As it was, he was starting to get more than a little nervous about a battalion of guards sweeping down on them and spiriting them away back to the palace. Possibly in cuffs. “Did you think to bring any money with you?”

“No…” Victor pat his pockets even though he was wearing brand new jeans and there was no way there could have been any money in them. “Do you think this wonderful gentleman would take an IOU?”

“Hang on.” Yuri reached for the messenger bag at his hip, glad that Minako had insisted he bring it. Glad that he had thought to take it out of the car and stow it in the library before the ceremony and glad that he’d thought to grab it before taking up his seat next to Yurio. It only took about a minute to shuffle through some of the junk in there, but Yuri grinned triumphantly as his hand closed around what he was looking for and he pulled out a wallet, holding it aloft like a trophy. “Thank god, it’s still in here.”

Yuri turns back to the man behind the counter only to find him shaking his head vigorously.

“No... No payment necessary!” The man began to wave a hand in front of him even as Yuri pulled out a card and placed it on the surface in front of him, already turning to start pulling tags off their clothing to be scanned.

“Nonsense.” Yuri poked Victor in the side until the prince got the hint and turned enough for Yuri to pull off the tag on the waistband of his jeans, depositing all of them on the counter next to his card as soon as he was sure he had them all. “We’re buying three full outfits. We’re paying for them.”

“I’d do what he says. My Yuri can be very determined when he sets his mind to something.” Victor placed a hand on Yuri’s shoulder, which did not help when it came to quelling the sudden flight of
butterflies in the pit of his stomach. He wasn’t sure when he had become *Victor’s* Yuri, but he didn’t have time to address that at the moment. “But thank you for your kindness.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Your Highness.” The man still has not reached out for either the tags or Yuri’s card and Yuri is starting to wonder if he’d done the right thing after all. “H-Honestly. It’s an honor enough to have you here in my humble store. I really couldn’t…”

“Please.” This time it’s Victor reaching out to push the card and tags closer to the register. “We insist. Although, I would request a favor in return.”

“Of course! Anything!” The shop owner is now fumbling for the tags, scanning them and typing codes into the register as he goes.

“Would you mind not telling anyone we were here…? For a little while at least.” Yuri didn’t have to look to know what kind of expression Victor was wearing right then. It was definitely the one where his eyes went a bit wider and his bottom lip stuck out just a few millimeters more than it should… The one that would make even the sternest of people fold. “We’re trying to inconspicuous.”

“Oh, of course!” The man ran Yuri’s card and handed it back with a bright smile, also handing over a plastic bag that Yuri gratefully used to shove their spare clothes into. “I won’t tell anyone, Your Highness. I promise.”

“I wasn’t worried at all.” Yuri looked back just in time to see Victor wink at the man. “Now, do we have everything we need to blend in?”

“I think so.” Yuri adjusted his glasses, he’d removed his contacts and mussed his hair in the dressing room in the hopes that the general public would be more used to seeing him without his frames and with his hair slicked back than like this. “Otabeck’s right. We should hurry if we don’t want them dragging us back too soon.”

“Y-Your Highness.” The shop owner stuttered, but was able to grab their attention again. “I… If you don’t mind, could you possibly take a photo with me? My daughter would kill me if I didn’t at least ask.”

“Do you have a camera?” Victor clapped his hands together happily as the man nodded, reaching under the counter and pulling out a cheap polaroid camera. “Excellent! Yurio! Get over here.”
“He wants a picture of you, not me.” Yurio shouted back from where he had wandered towards the back of the store, but he stomped his way back to the counter despite his protest. “But fine. If it means you’ll hurry the fuck up for a change, I’ll do it.”

“Thank you!” The man held out his camera and Yuri moved to take it, assuming he would be wanted to take the requested photo, but the man paused, pulling the camera away from Yuri and back to himself. “I’m sorry, Mr. Katsuki, but would you mind being in the picture as well? You’re my daughter’s favorite.”

“O-oh?” Yuri didn’t know what to say to that. “Um… That’s fine. No, I’ll definitely be in the photo. It’s okay.”

“I’ll take it.” Otabeck must have followed Yuri back up to the front of the store, though Yuri hadn’t seen him do so. The guard accepted the camera and stepped away while they arranged themselves in front of the camera with the store owner in the middle, Victor and Yuri on his left side, and Yurio on his right.

It wasn’t as awkward as Yuri had thought it might be. The man was nice and once the picture was taken he gave them one of his business cards and sent them on their way with a bright smile and more than a fair amount of enthusiasm as well as promises to wait until he’d closed for the night before he shared with anyone exactly who had been in his shop that day.

As they stepped outside, Victor tugged his cap low over his head and Yurio popped up the hood of his sleeveless vest, slipping on a pair of sunglasses as well. And then Victor’s hand was in his and Yuri was being practically drug down the street as the prince skipped ahead, in the wrong direction no less but Yuri was too busy trying not to fall flat on his face to correct him at the moment.

It was too late to go back now.

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It hadn’t been easy to put aside his natural inclination to worry and just enjoy the day at first. For the first five minutes Yuri had been looking over his shoulder constantly, though what exactly he was looking for, he wasn’t sure. All he knew was that once they were caught, and he was certain they would be caught sooner or later, nothing was going to go well for him.

But it was hard to keep up that nervous feeling when Victor was holding his hand and chattering at
his side, pointing out different shops and monuments and asking a million questions. It was like the prince’s joy and enthusiasm at being free was contagious. Even Yurio, who was walking side by side with Otabek behind them, had a more neutral expression as opposed to his typical scowl and Yuri could hear him mutter some questions of his own to the guard next to him from time to time.

They took the long way to the ice cream parlor, none of them wanting to loop back too close to the library in case the search had begun. Victor had reassured them several times that King Yakov had already messaged him through the mobile phone he always carried for emergencies and that there was no search, but even the prince didn’t want to risk it just in case. The long way was better, though, as it gave them much more to look at than the more direct way would have.

Yuri had long ago lost the feeling of being a tourist or someone who would be out of place in this area, but seeing it through Victor’s eyes made everything new again somehow. Like everything had been layered with a fresh coat of paint even though they hadn’t been. He could barely believe it had been less than half a year ago, barely even five months really, that he’d been out on these streets without Victor by his side, head down and his final destination in mind, never bothering to look up to see the sights because he figured they would be exactly as he’d seen them the last time he’d been down that way.

Five months ago he was so close to Victor, living only kilometers away, but he had never been so far.

Victor was here now, though, pressed up against Yuri’s side as they gripped their cones and tried to slurp up the creamy treats before they melted in the summer sun. His blue eyes were sparkling beneath the brim of an ugly, black ballcap as his gaze flit from one side of the street to another. His voice was a low and steady thrum in Yuri’s ear, wiggling into his body and settling deep into his very bones with each syllable.

They wandered the streets for hours, ducking into little shops here and there if something caught their fancy and eating lunch at the bakery Yuri had mentioned earlier. Everywhere they went, they got strange looks, and Yuri was sure they had even been recognized once or twice, but no one approached them.

Not that Yuri blamed them. If he’d seen Victor on the street a few months ago, he wouldn’t have known what to do either. In fact, he probably would have crossed over to the other side of the road just to make sure he didn’t get too close or turned around completely.

Honestly, sometimes he still didn’t know what to do, but that never seemed to matter to Victor. He would mow through all Yuri’s reservations with a grin and wink and Yuri would always be left wondering why he’d been so nervous in the first place.
“Where should we go now?” They had reached the end of a long row of shops and other boutiques and the only thing in front of them were some high-rise apartment complexes. Not exactly the kind of place that would be fun to explore and Victor was bouncing on the balls of his feet as he asked the question and craned his neck to see if something might catch his attention down a side street.

Yuri thought about it for a long minute. From what he recalled this was a nice area and there should be things to do even in the middle of the week with the sun beginning to sink towards the horizon. He just isn’t sure what those things might be. They’d had never been able to stay out this late, always needing to rush back to the dorms to make sure they didn’t miss the vans that would take them to the theater for their nightly performances.

There might be something, though…

“There’s a park no too far from here that is supposed to have a space for artists to set up stalls and for musicians to play in the evenings. I’ve never been myself, but I’ve heard it’s nice.” The second Yuri sees Victor’s eyes light up he knows he’s made the right suggestion. “Do you want to go?”

“That sounds perfect!” Victor turned around to look at Yurio and Otabeck. “What do you two think?”

“I think anywhere that has a place to sit down is fine. We’ve been walking around for hours. In the heat.” Yurio had stubbornly kept his hood up the entire time, but Yuri could see beads of sweat running down his temples.

“I know where Yuri is talking about. There’s plenty of shade and benches” Otabeck gestures down a side street. “Shall we go?”

Victor nods excitedly and Yurio simply grunts, but when Otabeck goes to lead the way, the blonde teen falls in at his side without any true complaints.

“Did you ever do this? Perform in a park, I mean?” Victor’s question is said with nothing other than open curiosity and Yuri pushes down the instinctual flare of irritation at being mistaken for a street performer. After all, Victor probably doesn’t know that’s a sensitive question to ask. Before today he’d never even seen a cronut before, though he’d more than made up for lost time by promptly inhaling three of them.
“No, I’ve never had to.” Yuri paused and chose his words carefully. The last thing he wanted was for Victor to think he was offended, even though if it had been anyone else in the world asking that question he probably would be. “I… Well, I was lucky. Even if the National Ballet hadn’t offered me a contract, there were several other companies that would have. Plus, when I was a teenager, there was a large city about a half hour’s bus ride away that would always let me dance in the corps when I had some spare time off lessons and private performances for the Threes and Twos that lived in the area. These kinds of pop-up performance spaces are more for artists, musicians, and entertainers that don’t have those kinds of offers yet. These Fives set up in nice parts of town and they hope to attract the attention of a Three or Two going about their business in the hopes of enticing their ongoing patronage. Before Mari got a steady stream of patrons who consistently bought her paintings, she would go out to these things, sometimes she’d bring some of Mom’s pottery with her if it had been a particularly slow month.”

“Oh… I… I didn’t know that…” Victor sounded odd. Perhaps almost a bit sad if Yuri were to hazard a guess.

“It’s not a big deal, Victor. I promise. It’s just the way things are.” Yuri shrugged, hoping desperately to be able to find some combination of words that would bring the mood back up from where it had tumbled. “Being a Five means being a creative. In order to make that profitable enough to support a family, you have to sell that creativity somehow. Not everyone can have their first project picked up by a major gallery or performance house. This is just another way for Fives to get their names and their work out there so they can hopefully make more money down the line. It’s either free or really cheap to get a space in a public park, so it’s a good opportunity for everyone.”

“That makes sense…” Yuri can tell there’s more to it. Something else that is bothering Victor about the whole situation, but he doesn’t give Victor a chance to go any further before he’s reaching out and grabbing the prince’s hand, giving it a tight squeeze and moving so close their shoulders bump together with each step. “Well, whatever the reason for it, it does sound like it could be fun.”

“It will be.” Yuri isn’t sure if that statement is true or not, but he says it anyways. As soon as he feels Victor squeeze his hand in return he knows it was the right thing to say.

Even with the mood significantly lightened, Yuri doesn’t move to drop Victor’s hand the entire way there and Victor doesn’t pull back either.

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The park is just starting to come alive when they reach it and Yurio immediately spots a booth to the left of the entrance that catches his eye and he drags Otabeck to it without even saying a word. Yuri and Victor watch them go with matching amused expressions.
“Do you think we should follow them?” Yuri isn’t sure he wants to. As fun and relaxing as today has been, he wouldn’t say ‘no’ to some time with Victor without his brother hanging on the periphery of their conversation waiting to drop a cutting remark or two whenever he feels he’s being ignored too much, but he is also painfully aware that it might not be the best of ideas to part ways with the only guard they had brought with them. Not that anyone had done anything other than react with complete surprise and amazement when they noticed exactly who it was sharing sidewalk space with them, but it seems foolish in a way to take the risk.

“I don’t know. I’d prefer not to.” Victor still hasn’t dropped Yuri’s hand and he felt himself being pulled even closer as Victor stares after his brother and the guard, clearly trying to figure out what the correct course of action should be. “It’s not too crowded and it’s an open space. So long as we don’t get too far away, I think we should be fine.”

“I think… I think we should be safe. From what I remember, this is a good area. Mostly Twos and Threes and a few well-off Fours. There should be plenty of patrolling officers around as well if we really need them.” Yuri was mostly thinking out loud to himself, more intent on scanning the people meandering around them instead of on Victor himself. The sound of disjointed music can be heard drifting over from the center of the park where there is a large, circular, tiled decal that sprawls out from what Yuri supposes is dead center. “Oh! It looks like they’re about to start playing!”

Without waiting for permission or even a response, Yuri is dragging them both closer to the area where the band of musicians is tuning their instruments and setting up sound equipment.

There was a small group of children scurrying about and they both laughed as they stumbled and had to lift their joined hands so that a few could slip between them as they made their way across the decal and towards some stone ledges others were using for seating. Victor laughed as they swung around in the ghost of a dance step in order to keep their balance and not lose the point of contact between their two hands, but the managed, and as they hopped up onto the ledge, Victor is sitting so close their thighs are pressed together, Victor’s body a solid line of warmth along Yuri’s side. It really is still far too hot to be leaning against each other, but Yuri doesn’t care and neither, it seems, does Victor.

There is a cool breeze blowing now and Yuri sighed as he tilted his face up to let the breeze play across his hot cheeks. Maybe he should have grabbed a hat, too. It could have helped prevent the slight sunburn he felt brewing on his face.

Even with his eyes closed, Yuri felt Victor move and before he knew it there was a pressure on his shoulder and the rough fabric of Victor’s hat scratching against the skin right under his jaw. Yuri
took in a deep breath through his nose before letting his cheek rest against the crown of Victor’s head. It wasn’t comfortable at all, but Yuri couldn’t be bothered to care.

Days like this made Yuri believe that he was the only one Victor cared about. That he was the only one Victor wanted to keep by his side. He knew without even having to ask that this wasn’t normal. That there weren’t going to be a lot of days where they could go out like they were normal people if Yuri was indeed Victor’s choice.

For the first time, that thought didn’t fill him with a vague sense of panic. To be honest, his life had never been what the typical person would consider normal. Staying with Victor… It would just be trading one abnormal life for another.

One where he might not have to be so lonely.

Yuri knew he should say something. The words were there on the tip of his tongue. Everything he’d been wanting to say, but had kept putting off. Before he could bring himself to break their comfortable silence, the band launched into their first song, the loud bang of the drums and the twang of a guitar filling the open space as easily as it would have an enclosed concert hall.

The children cheered and they rushed to the center of the space, dancing around in the afternoon sun, half of them didn’t even have shoes on.

There was the flash of cameras around the edges of the gathering, proud parents yelling out encouragement and snapping pictures of their children as they laughed and danced.

Victor moved his head from Yuri’s shoulder and angled their bodies so they were face to face and close enough that conversation even over the loud music was possible without having to shout into each other’s faces.

“We should call to have Father pick us up soon.” It looked like it pained him to say it. Yuri could see the reluctance reflected clearly in Victor’s blue eyes.

“I know.” Yuri ran the pad of his thumb across the bumps of Victor’s knuckles. “Today was…”

“Perfect.” Victor interrupted. “I wish I could promise you we could have more days like this, Yuri. I really do…”
“But you can’t. I know.” Now it was Yuri’s turn to interrupt. “I don’t mind that, not really. We could have gone anywhere, done anything. We could have gotten in those cars and gone right back to the palace with the others. It doesn’t really matter. The important this was that I spent the day with you… Well, and your brother and his friend, but I didn’t mind that so much either.”

“Yuri…” Victor pulled the hat off his head with his free hand and tossed it away somewhere so he could get even closer. “I want that, too. I want that so much. You have no idea how close I’ve been to just calling this whole thing off. Ending it all and choosing you.”

“Why didn’t you?” Yuri’s breath caught in his lungs and the world spun for a brief second, but he managed to find enough to speak.

“Trust me, the second I know you’ll say ‘yes’, I will.” Victor smiled softly.

“How do you know I won’t?” Yuri moved forward to close the last few centimeters of space between them, resting his forehead against Victor’s. “I could… I could say ‘yes’.”

“Would you? Really?” Victor reached up and cupped Yuri’s jaw with the hand that wasn’t tangled in Yuri’s tight grasp. “No regrets? You wouldn’t look up in the middle of a meeting a month from now and realize you’d made a mistake? Please, think about it before you answer. Please.”

What choice did Yuri have but to do as Victor asked?

It didn’t take him long. He’d been thinking about it for a long time. Longer than he was even consciously aware of.

“I want to.” Yuri chewed on his bottom lip, placing his spare hand on top of where their hands were still joined together against Yuri’s knee. “I’ve never wanted anything more in my entire life.”

“But you’re not ready.”

“But I’m not ready.” Yuri matched Victor’s dejected tone note for note. “I want to be, but I’m not.”
“I know.” Victor lifted his head to press a gentle kiss directly to the center of Yuri’s forehead. “We have time. I want to be one hundred percent clear with you, Yuri. There is no one else. It’s you. It’s been you for longer than I think I want to admit.”

“Okay… Okay…” Yuri closed his eyes. It was so much easier to think when he didn’t have to look at Victor’s face. When he didn’t have to see the flare of hope in his eyes.

Victor was right. Yuri wasn’t ready. If they were two different people. If Victor wasn’t a prince. If there wasn’t the pressure of being in the public’s eye…

If they were just two people. If they were just Victor and Yuri, he knew what his answer would be.

But they weren’t, and they never could be.

He let Victor pull him into a crushing embrace, ignoring the way his glasses dug into the bridge of his nose when he dug his forehead into the soft skin of Victor’s neck. He even wrapped his arms around the prince in return.

Victor had said they had time. They had time.

Now if only Yuri could stop the whispers at the back of his head that told him they didn’t have as much as time he thought.

The feeling of dread that told Yuri loud and clear that the day when he was going to need to make his choice was coming sooner than either of them thought it would.

He could only hope to be ready when that time finally came.
Repercussion

Chapter Notes

Wow... I am so, so sorry for the long delay. Not to go into too much detail, but I haven't been feeling well lately and my doctor decided I needed to have my gallbladder removed earlier this week and I did not bounce back as quickly as I thought I would. I've basically spent most of the last week asleep or high on pain pills... Which is not a conducive writing environment...

There shouldn't be another delay quite this long between any of the other chapters, I promise!

Chapter 15 – Repercussion

No matter how many reassurances Victor tried to give him that he would handle any fallout from their spontaneous day on the town, Yuri couldn't help but worry the whole way back to the palace. Logically, he knew that, even though the king was bound to be furious, it was very unlikely that he was going to be arrested or even sent home. He also got the feeling, that if Victor had his way, none of them would be in any trouble at all, no matter how much they might deserve it.

In fact, Victor tried to convince the rest of them to just retire to their rooms once they were safely back at the palace, but Yuri adamantly refused.

“I made my own choice. I didn’t have to go with you. It’s as much on me as it is on you, so you shouldn’t have to face anyone alone.”

That had ended that argument, especially when Yurio had surprisingly taken Yuri’s side and then proceeded to glare his older brother into submission. Yuri wasn’t entirely sure where that well of support had come from, but he was more than willing to accept it. The less divided they were, the better.

The sun had gone down completely by the time they made to the palace and the car took them around to the rear of the property. They were met at one of the back doors by a harried looking Mila who was sorting through a stack of papers attached to a clipboard as they hurried to tumble out of the car in a somewhat graceful manner.

Yuri didn’t need a mirror to know they made an interesting picture standing on the gravel drive. Both
Yuri and Victor had slight sunburns across their nose and cheeks and their new clothing was rumpled from where they had been sitting on the ground in the park before the car had arrived for them. Yurio and Otabeck didn't look much better. Yurio’s hair was up in a haphazard ponytail and he still had his hood up with his sunglasses tucked into the open collar of his vest. The guard simply looked wilted, his leather jacket tucked under his arm and the dark hair over his undercut sticking up despite his many efforts to smooth it back down.

“How mad is he?” Victor asked as soon as he stepped forward with more confidence than Yuri would have been able to convey in that moment. Mila blanched. “That bad, huh?”

“Well, it’s not necessarily good.” Mila offered up a weak smile that did nothing to reassure Yuri at all. From the way the skin around the corner of Victor’s eyes went tight, Yuri could tell that he wasn’t exactly as confident as he was trying to seem either. “I’ve been running around putting out fires for most of the afternoon… I appreciate how you tried to keep your head down, but a fair amount of people noticed you…”

“Oh…” For a split second Victor looked crestfallen before he was able to school his expression back into something more neutral. “I’m sorry. I should have paid better attention.”

“We should have all paid better attention.” Yuri cut in. “Not that I would change anything, but we could have taken a second to plan things out a little better.”

“Speak for your fucking selves. If it had just been me out there no one would have noticed a thing. You two dumbasses were too damn obvious. Probably wouldn’t have noticed a fucking parade pass by.” Yurio tossed his bangs out of his face with a flip of his head and placed his hands on his hips as he glared at the both of them. “You idiots almost walked out into traffic twice because you were too busy looking into each other’s eyes.”

“That was… Well… I mean…” Yuri fidgeted in place as he tried to find some kind of rebuttal to that. It might have helped if it wasn’t true. He hadn’t been sure Yurio had noticed that, but it seemed that he had.

“Whatever it was, it’s neither here nor there at this point because it happened.” This time Mila’s smile was more convincing. “It’s early, but we’re getting mostly positive responses… Not that it’s going to save you from getting the lecture of a lifetime from the king.”

“I’ll handle my father.” Victor waved off Mila’s skeptical huff. “Can you be prepared to put together a report on whatever information you’ve managed to gather so far within an hour?”
“Yes. It's actually mostly done by this point.” Mila gestured for them to follow her and they all fell into line quickly, Victor and Yuri at the front and Yurio and Otabeck falling to the back. “King Yakov is already two steps ahead of you. We’ve been working on it since they got back without you.”

Victor spared a quick glance at where Yuri had calmly fallen in at his side. Yuri sighed and nodded his head once. Whatever it was that Victor was thinking, he shouldn’t feel like he needed to hide it from Yuri. It wasn’t like a million horrible situations weren’t already running themselves through Yuri’s mind as it was. Whatever Mila could tell them couldn’t be any worse than what his brain was trying to tell him in her stead.

“What are we walking into, Mila?” Yuri felt the back of Victor’s hand ghost across his own. It helped cut down the spike of anxiety that swelled at the serious tone in the prince’s voice. “Is this going to be Father’s general disappointment when I do something reckless, or is there an actual reason for him to be angry with us?”

“It’s too soon to tell in the long term…” Mila tucked a strand of his bright red hair behind her ear and slowed down enough so that she could look at them. “But… I wasn’t lying when I said we’re finding mostly positive responses. It’s not a disaster, by any means. The king will tell you more.”

“After he’s done yelling.” Victor’s cheerful demeanor was back in full force it went a long way to convincing Yuri that the world wasn’t about to end. Victor could be almost too good at convincing people things were okay when they really weren’t, but Yuri was sure that wasn’t what he was trying to do. He wasn’t sure how he knew, but he was willing to run with the assumption for the time being because he didn’t think having a panic attack right then was going to be helpful either. “It’s been awhile since he’s had a good yell. It might be therapeutic for him.”

“Come find me once you’re done and let me know if you still think that.” Mila was obviously teasing now, but Yuri didn't get to take any time to appreciate the lighter mood as the massive double doors that lead to the king’s private study loomed in front of them far sooner than Yuri anticipated.

It was time to face the consequences of their actions, whatever those consequences turned out to be.

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“You’ve done plenty of stupid things in the past, but this has to be the stupidest by a long shot!” King Yakov hadn’t even waited for the four of them to truly step into the room before he had stalked
around his massive desk and had zeroed on in Victor, shouting and throwing his hands in the air wildly to add emphasis to tirade. “We thought you’d been kidnapped! We thought we were going to have to tear the entire city to pieces trying to find you! Anything could have happened!”

“I texted you to let you know we were fine…”

“Twenty minutes after you’d gone missing!” King Yakov cut Victor off before he could really get started. “If you wanted to spend the rest of the day in the city all you had to do was ask, Victor. We could have figured something out, sent some guards with you…”

“We had a guard.” To his credit, Victor hadn’t backed down one bit, standing in front of his raging father with a relaxed posture, hands tucked in his pockets and a small smile on his lips as though they were having a pleasant conversation instead of a one-sided screaming match. “More than that would have drawn too much attention.”

Yuri was sure it wouldn’t help their case at all to point out that Otabek hadn’t actually been part of their plans, and Victor wisely left that detail out.

“You drew plenty of attention even with only one guard! I don’t think you even know the meaning of the word ‘subtlety’.” This time Yakov poked Victor firmly in the chest. “You more than anyone know that you can’t just go running off like that with nothing more than a green guard to keep you safe, Victor. What if something had happened to you? Or what if something had happened to Yurio or Yuri? Did you think of that before you ran off? Did you?”

“Nothing did happen. Nothing except us having some fucking fun for a change.” Yurio took a giant step forward, drawing all their attention towards him. “And stop fucking yelling at just him. We all wanted to go. If a mistake was made, we all made it.”

“Trust me, you are not getting away with this, either.” Yakov didn’t even skip a beat, sending Yurio and Yuri a warning glare before turning back to Victor. “You knew better. You should have been the voice of reason!”

“It was my idea, Father. You’re right. I should have known better.” Victor looked as though he was ready to admit defeat and something twisted around in the pit of Yuri’s stomach.

“No, we all should have known better. There is no excuse for it, Your Highness.” Yuri wasn’t sure if he was going to make matters better or worse by speaking up, but he couldn’t stand there and let
Victor take the brunt of the king’s ire. Even if that had been their plan from the beginning, something about it wasn’t sitting right with him now that they were knee deep and with little chance to turn around now. “We didn’t have to go with him. We could have let him run off on his own and immediately gone to find you to tell you what was happening, but we didn’t. Besides… It was… Well, it was my idea. Victor wouldn’t have even thought to go if I hadn’t mentioned being familiar with the area.”

“Shit.” Yakov shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You are all a bunch of noble idiots. Don’t worry. I don’t care whose idea it was. You’re all in trouble.”

“All of us?”

“Wait! That’s not fucking fair!”

Both brothers spoke at the same time, Yurio’s shout almost overpowering Victor’s question. For his part, Yuri wisely kept his mouth firmly shut. He might not know much about anything where this world was concerned, but he did have a good idea of when it was best to hold his tongue so as not to dig their grave so deep no one would ever find them again.

“You’re right. It’s not fair, and I suppose you’re not all in trouble. Otabeck was just doing his job in making sure none of you ended up kidnapped or worse, so he’s off the hook.” Yakov nodded in the direction of the guard, who gave a perfect salute in response. “In fact, if you could please escort Yurio to his room and make sure he stays there for the rest of the night?”

“What?” Yurio immediately jumped away from Otabeck’s side, arms up like he was ready to physically push the other away should he choose to try to enforce the king’s command. “Why do I have to leave?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll yell at you in the morning. I’m confident I’ll still be plenty angry.” Yakov pointed towards the doors. “You can walk out of here under your own power or I can call more guards and they can drag you out. It’s up to you.”

“Fucking fine, but we’re not done, old man!” Yurio snarled, green eyes flashing before he spun on his heel and stomped out of the study, Otabeck shadowing him out into the hall, almost not moving fast enough to avoid being clipped by the edge of the door as the young prince slammed it shut in his wake.
“You didn’t have to send him away. He was actually behaving pretty well by his standards.” Victor had watched his brother go, so he turned back towards his father as he spoke. “You know he’s going to be furious about being sent to his room.”

“Would you prefer if I call him back so that we can get his opinion on your love life and what we’re going to do about the tabloids this time?” The king raised an eyebrow and when neither Victor nor Yuri said anything, he went on. “I didn’t think so. Victor, this is why you need to talk to me before you just take off like that. We could have gotten ahead of any articles, but now we’re playing defense again.”

“We’re sorry… We didn’t think…”

“Of course, you didn’t think. You never think.” Yakov held up a hand for silence as Victor had opened his mouth to speak again. “I’ve told you a million times that there are repercussions to everything that you do. Good and bad. You don’t get the luxury of making unilateral decisions. And you…” Yakov turned away from his son and pointed towards Yuri, who clenched his hands at his side in order to hide how hard his hands were shaking. “If you want to stay here for much longer, you need to understand that, too.”

“You shouldn’t blame Yuri…”

“I’m not blaming Yuri. Or your brother.” King Yakov again cut Victor off before he could even begin. “I’m blaming you. Yes, they have some share of the responsibility for not taking a second to use common sense, but you have more than enough experience to have known better.”

“Putting your own personal safety aside, neither of you bothered to stop of think about how this would look to the public, did you?” The king paused and glared at the both of them. There was nothing Victor or Yuri could do but shake their heads. It was the truth, after all. They hadn’t done any thinking. Victor had wanted to go and he’d looked so happy the whole time. So much so that Yuri probably wouldn’t have been able to say ‘no’ even if he had thought to do so. “You are both lucky the public likes Yuri. That they are taking this as something planned. The prince taking his brother and one of his suitors out for a look around the city.”

“Aside from the pre-planning it part, that’s kind of exactly what happened.” Yuri pointed out quickly. As much as he had teased Victor before about letting the prince carry the brunt of the responsibility for their actions on his own, he was tired of standing silent and letting the king yell at Victor as though he wasn’t even there and hadn’t been capable of making his own ill-advised choices. “I’m sorry for any trouble we’ve caused you.”
“It’s fine. We’ll fix it. Just don’t let it happen again.” The king sent him a look that Yuri had difficulty deciphering completely, but it wasn’t necessarily an ‘angry’ look, so he figured he had hopefully said something right.

“I said that I was sorry, too!” Victor actually looked like he was on the verge of pouting.

“When he says he’s sorry, you can tell he means it and is actually going to learn something.” The king turned away from Yuri and back to his son, stern expression firmly in place. “When you say it, you’re just trying to get out of trouble.”

“Well, yes, but…”

“Well, yes, but what?” The king paused then and waited under Victor sighed and then shrugged. Yuri was starting to get the feeling that he had been witnessing a conversation that had taken place a million times before. Perhaps the topic was always slightly different, but the back and forth sounded as though they both knew their parts and were more than used to playing them. “That’s what I thought.”

No one said anything for a long moment. Yuri mostly because he didn’t know what he could say. The king kept looking between the two of them as though there was something he could see that they couldn’t and it was all Yuri could do to stand tall under the scrutiny.

“What’s done it done. You’re all back safe, and Mila has been working for the past few hours to come up with a plan of action to make sure we can spin this whatever way we want. I wasn’t kidding, though. You are both damn lucky that Yuri is one of the favorites with the general public. This would be much more difficult if he wasn’t.” The king sent Yuri another guarded look than he wasn’t sure he had the mental fortitude to try to categorize. “Before you go to bed for the night, there is a camera crew waiting in one of the parlors to do a quick post-date interview with Yuri. Morooka will run the interview and he’s been given a list of questions and strict instructions to actually stick to them this time. It shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes or so and Mila will go with you to supervise.”

“That sounds like a good plan, Father.” Victor sounded cheerful enough, but Yuri was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. It was a good plan, but, for all the trouble they’d caused, it felt almost too easy. “Is there anything particular we should be telling them in the interview?”

“I didn’t say you would be a part of it. I need you to stay here. You missed an entire day’s worth of work. Now is as good a time as any to get you caught up so you won’t fall any further behind.” Even as Victor opened his mouth to protest, Yuri reached out and grabbed his wrist, not missing the
raised eyebrow the king sent his way before he went on. “You can’t keep coming to the boy’s rescue, Victor. Not if either of you want this to work out long term.”

“He’s right.” As much as Yuri didn’t want it to be true, he knew the king was right. Besides, Yuri had decided to take his share of responsibility for their decision that morning. Dealing with the consequences in whatever way the king saw fit was one of those responsibilities. “We don’t have to like it, but he is right. There are some things I’m going to have to do on my own. You can’t be there 24/7.”

“Are you sure?” Victor twisted the wrist Yuri was still holding until he got the hint and slid his grip down so Victor could squeeze his hand. There was concern reflecting in the prince's blue eyes and Yuri offered up what he hoped was a confident smile in return.

“I’m sure.” And Yuri was. He might not like the thought of having to do what could very well turn out to be a severely personal interview on his own, but he did know he had to do it. Victor had given him the answer to the question he had been too scared to ask. He deserved to give something back to Victor in return. “I don’t want to do it alone, but I can. I can and I will.”

“Of course, you can. I don’t doubt that one bit.” Victor sounded like he meant it, too. Like Yuri crashing and burning on his own was never an option he’d considered. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want to be there.”

“You heard the boy. He’ll be fine.” King Yakov waves a hand through the air, clearly not concerned in the slightest. Yuri is actually glad for the king’s dismissive attitude for once. He wasn’t sure what his anxiety would do if the king had been anything else. “They’ll be expecting him soon. He needs to go prepare. You need to stay. We have a lot we need to go over before you can go to bed.”

There is another squeeze on his hand and Yuri turns so that he is focused on Victor and Victor only.

“Don’t worry, Victor. I’ll be fine.”

He can only hope that statement turns out to be true.

~

The interview with Morooka had been geared more like the other one on one interviews and
soundbites Yuri had recorded over the time he’d been there. All he wanted was details. Where had they gone? What had they seen? Was Yuri looking forward to another date just like it in the future? It had been easy to breeze through it.

The interrogation put on by his friends when he returned to his room was much more intense.

“Yuri!”

He’d barely taken half a step into his room when Phichit launched himself up from wherever he’d been sitting and threw his arms around Yuri, squeezing him so tightly Yuri almost couldn’t breathe for a second. Phichit didn’t seem to notice or care about the state of Yuri’s breathing as he continued shouting his name and rocking them both back and forth in excitement.

“P-Phichit?” Yuri’s arms were pinned to his sides, but he managed to move his left arm just enough so that he could tap the dark-skinned man against his side. “Okay... I’ve been thoroughly hugged. Can I breathe now?”

“Sure!” Phichit chirped happily as he pulled back, grabbing Yuri by the hands instead of his whole body. Yuri felt a sharp tug as he stumbled forward as Phichit pulled him deeper into the room. Part of him wanted to pull back and at least close the door behind him, but Phichit didn’t give him a chance. “You’ve been gone for hours. We were starting to worry that you weren’t going to come back at all!”

Yuri wasn’t sure exactly what to say to that. On the long list of things Yuri had worried about when it came to his decision to let Victor drag him off into the city, the reactions of his friends hadn’t actually been something he’d bothered to consider.

He supposed he should have. They were technically all competing for the same thing. For Victor’s attention, and Yuri had just waltzed off with the prince like it was nothing without even a second though to the people they were leaving behind. He’d practically flaunted how close he was with the prince right in their faces. He wouldn't have been surprised at all if any of them were angry with him.

Phichit didn’t seem to need an answer at the moment, though. Instead he used his firm grip on Yuri’s hands to pull his arms up and turned Yuri’s wrists back and forth like he was looking for something. What he was looking for, Yuri couldn’t even begin to guess, but whatever it was, the other man looked equal parts relieved and irritated to not find it.
Before Yuri could ask exactly what the other man was doing, Phichit had dropped one of his hands and used the other tug continue to tug Yuri towards the center of the room.

With Phichit no longer taking up most of his field of vision, Yuri could see Chris perched on the edge of his desk and Leo and Guang Hong sitting cross-legged on his bed. Both Guang Hong and Leo were looking at him much like Phichit had a moment ago, like they were looking for something they weren’t entirely sure about. Chris just looked amused, which was his typical default expression.

“You didn’t really think I wasn’t coming back, did you?” Suddenly Yuri was almost desperate to know the answer. “Did you think I went home?”

“We were pretty sure you hadn’t gone home since all your things were still here.” Chris cocked his hip and crossed his arms over his chest, a playful smirk stretched across his lips. “Minako also told us no one had given her instructions to pack you up either.”

“Where is Minako?” Yuri was sure that wasn’t exactly the most important question he should be asking, but his attendant’s absence was unusual. She was always there in the room when Yuri would turn up to begin his pre-bedtime routine in the evenings, but from what he could tell tonight she wasn’t.

“Not sure. She said something about being needed elsewhere.” Leo shrugged from his spot on the bed, wiggling away so that Phichit, who had finally released Yuri, could plop down between him and Guang Hong. “She did tell us to let you know that if you need her, you can ring for her, though.”

“They’re trying to hide it from us, but the whole palace has been in an uproar ever since we got back.” Guang Hong’s voice was soft, but there was an intense look in his eyes as he continued to stare at where Yuri was standing alone in the middle of the room. “I… Well, I wasn’t supposed to be there and I’m sure I definitely wasn’t supposed to be listening, but… I heard Mila saying they didn’t know where any of you were.”

“We were worried.” Phichit cut in before Yuri could say anything. “No one was saying anything, least of all to us, but we could tell something wasn’t right.”

“That’s… That’s because we didn’t exactly tell anyone we were leaving or where we were going.” Yuri knew his face was turning red. Out of everything, out of all the reactions he thought would be waiting for him when they’d gotten back… Worry had never once been something he’d expected anyone else to feel. “I guess… I guess I’m not used to not being able to just kind of… Well, just go somewhere I want to go when I want to go there. All I did was tell Victor that getting ice cream
sounded good after we’d been out in the heat for so long and that there was a place no too far that I
knew of… And then we just went…”

“Ice cream?” Chris threw his head back and laughed. “This whole thing was about ice cream? Shit, they were all acting like the lot of you had been kidnapped and were being held for ransom or worse and all you were really doing was going out for ice cream?”

“Um… Yes?”

What else could Yuri have done in that moment but agree? It was the truth after all.

At that moment, Phichit burst out into laughter and Chris only grew louder, doubling over and
gripping the edge of the desk so hard his knuckles turned white in an effort not to tumble to the floor. Leo was shaking his head as though he still couldn’t quite believe this was happening at all and Guang Hong was trying, and mostly failing, to hide nervous giggles behind the palm of his hand.

Yuri mumbled under his breath and turned around to swing the door to his room closed before turning back towards the other men and sighing heavily. His friends didn’t look like they were going
to calm down any time soon and Yuri was feeling more than a little drained from a combination of the long day and the mental exhaustion that always seemed to plague him after he had to give any kind of interview.

Figuring his friends would be fine on their own for a minute or two, Yuri drug himself into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar in case they called for his attention. He removed the contact case from his bag and put it back where it belonged on the counter. The clothes he’d been wearing before changing in the shop went into the laundry hamper and the bag itself was tossed into the corner next to the hamper. He would worry about it later.

He placed his glasses on the counter and splashed water on his face. What he really wanted was a long soak in the tub and then to go straight to bed, but he got the feeling that was not going to be an option. At least, not until he found a way to get his friends out of his room and into their own for the night.

On the one hand, he was pretty sure they would go if he told them to leave. On the other hand… On the other hand, he almost didn’t want them to go. His head and body were still buzzing with Victor’s words and what they had meant. What they could mean for Yuri if he would let himself accept them.
‘There is no one else. It’s you. It’s been you for longer than I think I want to admit.’

Despite his exhaustion, Yuri wasn’t quite ready to be completely alone with those words. Not yet.

Placing his glasses back onto his face, Yuri stepped away from the counter and back out into the room where it sounded like the laughter was dying down at long last.

“You didn’t really think we’d been kidnapped, did you?” Yuri asked hesitantly.

“Maybe a bit at first.” Chris offers up with a shrug. They are all still in their places from before. Chris on the desk and the other three piled on top of Yuri’s bed. “But then the atmosphere had changed some once we got back to the palace. The guards didn’t seem so panicked any longer and the king just seemed angry instead of worried.”

“They didn’t tell us anything, though.” Phichit looked a bit put out by that fact, as though, even hours later, he was upset about not being part of the gossip. “We waited for hours for you to come back. In the Entertaining Room. Then when they came to tell us that all of you were on your way and that we should go to bed… The others decided they were fine getting information in the morning, but Minako said we could wait here for you if we wanted so long as we didn’t mess with any of your things… Which we didn’t, by the way!”

“I didn’t think you would.” Perhaps Yuri should have been more concerned about his friends, his competitors really, being alone for so long with his stuff, but he surprisingly wasn’t. Even if he thought they were the kind of people that would stoop to snooping as a tactic, which he didn’t, there wasn’t anything he was trying to hide. Nothing they would be able to find out from going through his clothing and books at least. “It honestly wasn’t as big of a deal as they’re making it out to be. We got ice cream, did some shopping, got lunch, and then we watched some artists in a park until a car came around to take us back here.”

“That’s it. All this uproar was just for that?” Leo looked even more surprised now than he had been before. “That seems like such a waste of energy.”

“Do you really think so?” Guang Hong also looked like he might agree with Leo on that count.

“Quick question, Yuri.” Chris pulled his legs up underneath him on top of Yuri’s desk. “Did any of you happen to tell anyone you were going before you went?”
“Nope.” There was no point hiding it. Gossip got around despite Mila’s best efforts to keep it out. Either a guard or servant had probably heard something and had told someone who had told someone else… The information would trickle out to the other Elite from there. Yuri might as well confirm it for his friends before they found out on their own.

“That would explain it, then.” Chris hummed deep in the back of his throat. “You’re lucky they didn’t send half the National Guard out to drag you back by your ears.”

“They probably would have if Otabeck hadn’t noticed us leaving and followed us.” Yuri pointed out, leaning back against the doorknob behind him. “From what I’ve managed to gather, the king wasn’t happy about it, but… But we might have been seen and, um, photographed? I’m pretty sure they wanted a public scene less than they felt a need to get us back here.”

“You have the worst luck with cameras.” Phichit shook his head. “At least they let you finish your date, though. How was it? You have to give us all the juicy details. Don’t let us read about it in the papers like everyone else!”

“It was… Fun.” Yuri could tell from his friend’s expressions that his description was weak and they were about to press him for more. “It was different? More relaxed. I get the feeling neither Victor nor Yurio get out much. They… They really seemed to enjoy themselves.”

“I wonder if this means they are going to let all of us out more.” Guang Hong folded his hand in his lap and looked over at Yuri like he was going to have some kind of answer. “I mean, nothing bad did happen so that might be a good thing, right?”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.” Chris chimed in, not giving Yuri a chance to answer even if he had managed to think of something to say. “Most of the places in Angeles are probably fairly safe, but not everyone agrees with everything the royals do at all times. There is no such thing as making an entire country worth of citizens happy ever second of the day. There are always going to be some that feel left behind or stepped on. The question really should be, are they going to be willing to risk it?”

“That’s… Heavy.” Leo frowned. “I guess… I guess I never thought about that aspect of it too much.”

“We’re going to have to start thinking about it. They aren’t going to be content to get interviews with us about nothing more important than what clothes we wore yesterday or where we hope the prince might take us on a date in the future.” Chris rarely looked too serious, the other man typically relying on his charismatic personality to make his points instead of severity. “The Royal Family of Britannia
will be here in a few days. The time for rehearsals is over, boys.”

The five of them exchanged weighted looks. No one had to say anything to know that Chris was right. The time had been long overdue for them to begin testing the waters they were expected to swim in if any of them truly wanted to be the Royal Consort.

And Yuri was now more determined than ever not to lose.
Whew. I went back to work this week and the real world took me out at the knees. Hahaha. Apparently my backup when I was out on my LOA either couldn't or wouldn't do like half the things I usually do and I came back on the day before we had a massive visit from a potential client so... Work was great.

But now it's the weekend and I finally have time to finish out and edit Chapter 16! Visiting royalty! Some Victor/Yuri cuddle times! More politics!

Also, everything from the name of the country to the members of the royal family is completely made up by me. You won't find it in the book series.

Chapter 16 – Visitors

The next two weeks passed by in a blur as July faded into August and the arrival of the new royals grew ever closer.

Even worse than anticipating the Britannians’ arrival and all the duties Yuri was expected to have to perform over the course of their visit, was having to watch as Victor disappeared for hours at a time with one or two of the other Elite as they went on dates outside of the palace walls. Even knowing they were never gone long, and knowing Victor would always make a point to seek him out almost the very second he got back, still didn’t help the snarl of something new that had taken up a space right underneath his ribcage.

Though he’d never felt anything quite like it before, Yuri was pretty sure it was jealousy.

“You know there’s nothing to worry about.” His attendant pat him on the top of the head as she moved across his room, intent on digging out an appropriate outfit for dinner. Minako had shown up the morning after Yuri’s date in the city as bright and chipper as ever and, without him having to say a word, she’d become his ultimate champion. It was reassuring to have her support. He knew his friends wished him well, but it still felt too awkward to come to them with anything regarding his rapidly evolving feelings for the prince. Not when he wasn’t sure their own feelings about the man they were all courting. “You know if you ask him anything, he’d tell you. Including an honest recounting of whatever he has and hasn’t done with the others.”

“I know.” And Yuri did know. Victor had never been anything other than completely honest with him the entire time they had known each other. “That doesn’t mean I want to hear about it.”
“Hear about what? How everyone is always polite and friendly, but that the entire time he was thinking of how much better it would be if it had been you there in their stead?” Minako chuckled lightly as Yuri groaned and hid his blush behind his hands. “Don’t worry. I think he likes saying it almost as much as you like hearing it.”

“Minako…” Yuri groaned and flopped down onto his back, bouncing a bit against the mattress beneath him. “It’s just… Weird, okay? You can understand that, right?”

“I’ll be the first to admit nothing about this situation is particularly ideal, but no one said this was going to be a perfect process.” He could hear the woman shuffling through his closet now as she spoke. “On the bright side, our guests will be here tomorrow afternoon. There won’t be a lot of time for Prince Victor to run off with anyone until they leave… Well, with anyone but you, of course. I’m sure he won’t be able to stay away from your side.”

“Hmmm…” Yuri hummed in response, not quite trusting any words that would come from trying to respond to that statement.

“Stop moping. You’ll see him in ten minutes at dinner.” Minako tossed a shirt on his face as she spoke and Yuri flailed around for a minute before sitting up, glaring at his attendant in a gesture that largely went ignored. “Get up. You need to finish getting dressed.”

Yuri groaned, but complied. His attendant was right, as she often was. He was going to get to see Victor soon enough, even if it was going to be in the company of the others. Maybe he would get lucky and they would be seated close to each other again. It had yet to happen where they were side by side since the morning they’d escaped and gone on their date. In Yuri’s mind, they were well overdue to sit beside each other again.

He went through the process of getting ready on autopilot. It was still difficult to believe sometimes that three months ago this had all been new. That he had been so nervous his hands would shake when he would tug on the clothing he’d been provided.

He’d come a long way since then.

Not that he didn’t still get nervous or anxious, because he did. More frequently than he was willing to admit to. It was just that he was starting to get used to it now. Able to manage it better, even when Victor couldn’t be physically present to calm his nerves.
Of course, the true test wouldn’t be tonight. It would be tomorrow. It would be Yuri having to stand there and meet the royal guests without making a complete and utter fool of himself.

He was ready. He had to be.

He didn’t have a choice.

~

“What are they like? The royal family from Britannia?”

Yuri felt Victor’s weight shift against his chest and he looked down to see Victor’s blue eyes looking back up at him, silver brows arched towards his hairline.

This was something new they had started in the past few weeks. After dinner they would spend some time talking to the others, pretend to go their separate ways and then meet up again in a parlor on the second floor of the west wing, tucked away and mostly left unused. There were several chairs, low tables, and a shelf full of books, but what made this room Yuri’s new favorite was the oversized couch that sat beneath a massive window that looked out over the garden. They would curl up on the couch in this stolen bit of time and they would talk about everything and nothing until Victor was inevitably late for something or Yuri needed to go meet up with his friends before his absence was noted.

Sometimes they would sit on opposite ends with their legs tangled together in the middle. Sometimes Yuri would curl up in Victor’s lap, back against his broad chest and their hands laced together across Yuri’s stomach.

And sometimes, like tonight, Victor was in Yuri’s lap, slumped down with his head resting in the crook of Yuri’s shoulder.

“Shouldn’t you know everything there is to know about them by now?” Victor asked, shifting around so he was less slumped and more upright, though he still stayed pressed closely against Yuri in the process. “You’ve been studying them for at least a month.”

“I know their entire family history, birthdays, and which of the queen’s nieces just got a puppy for Christmas last year, but that doesn’t mean I know anything about who they really are.” Yuri pointed
“Learning rote facts about a person isn’t a substitute for actually knowing them.”

“I can tell you that, while little Cecelia loves her puppy, what she really asked for was a pony.” Victor offered up with a grin as he twisted out of Yuri’s loose grasp and sat up completely. “Wouldn’t this count as cheating, though?”

“You tell me. You’re the one that makes the rules.” Yuri knew he was only half teasing. That if Victor didn’t want to tell him anything, he would back off immediately.

“I suppose I do make the rules, don’t I?” Victor tapped the index finger of his right hand against his chin and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. “Hmmm… I suppose to be on the fair side, I would have to give answers to any of the other Elite if they were to ask… Which they haven’t, by the way. I’d have to say this is just an excellent example of you using all the resources available to you.”

“So… Tell me. What are they like?” Yuri pulled his legs up underneath him and leant back against the arm of the couch, settling in. “They’re all coming, right? The Queen and King and their children.”

“Everyone except the youngest.” Victor confirms. “Angelique has caught a bit of a lingering summer cold and will be staying with her grandmother back home. It’s probably for the best. She just turned six in the spring and from what I’ve heard she has yet to get over her hair pulling phase. Yurio just managed to get the bald spot behind his left ear to grow back out, he’d have hated to have the same chunk pulled out again.”

“So… Queen Grace, King Mason, and their four eldest… Prince Alexander, Princess Chloe, Prince Ethan and Princess Eva?” Yuri was confident in his answer and Victor nodded. “Have you spent a lot of time with them?”

“A fair amount.” Victor reached out and grabbed Yuri’s hand, leaning his shoulder against the back of the couch as he did so. “Alex is two years younger than myself, but we haven’t had much opportunity for socializing. He was away at boarding school for most of his teenage years while I was here with my own tutors. Chloe is three years younger than I am, but we have been fairly close for years, though. We write letters every so often, but we only meet twice a year. Once when they come here and then we usually visit them just before Christmas… As for the twins Ethan and Eva… They’re the same age as Yurio, so they tend to get thrown together. I can’t say I know much about them other than the colorful commentary my brother gives us. They don’t exactly get along, but, then again, Yurio doesn’t get along with most people.”

“I don’t know about that. He’s been a lot better lately.” He might not have known much about how
the younger prince was before they’d gotten there, but Yuri had to say that Yurio was significantly less prickly than he had been at the beginning. “Maybe you should force him to live with a bunch of strangers more often. It could be good for him.”

“Or bad for them.” Victor laughed and Yuri laughed along with him. “He’ll be happy to have all of you around. You’ve all been an excellent distraction from his normal duties, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the princes and princesses were more interested in spending time with new faces rather than bother him.”

“Happy to be of service.” Yuri smiled, running his thumb over Victor’s knuckles as he did so. “Are you excited to see them?”

“Most of them.” Victor shrugged one shoulder. “The Queen and King have always been kind to us. Alex can be a bit of a stuck up brat from time to time, but he keeps to himself for the most part. The twins can get excitable about the most random things and they do like to poke at Yurio from time to time to see what’ll happen, but they are mostly harmless. And Chloe… Well, Chloe’s probably the closest thing I have to a best friend… You know, before I met you, of course. The last time we exchanged letters she told me she was looking forward to getting to meet you.”

“M-Me?” Yuri took a deep breath and tried to get his instinctive urge to stutter and turn his face away under control. “Wait… I’m your best friend?”

“Among other things.” Victor didn’t pause and his grin never wavered. “You aren’t just one thing to me, Yuri. You are so much more than that, but out of everything, you are my friend. You told me to trust you once, do you remember that?”

“Yes, I do.” It felt like it had been years ago instead of months, but Yuri remembered that day clearly. Looking back, he supposed it had been their first real date, though he hadn’t been anywhere near ready to admit it out loud, much less to himself.

“Good.” Victor lifted their joined hands and placed a soft kiss on each of Yuri’s fingertips, smirking as Yuri felt the warmth of a blush rise in his cheeks. “I trust you. Implicitly. More than I’ve ever trusted anyone before in my life. Do you trust me?”

“Yes, of course.” Perhaps later Yuri would spare a brief moment to freak out about how quickly and easily those words fell out of him at Victor’s question. Yuri never had been one to trust easily, but there was something about Victor. Something about how open and honest he always was with Yuri that made him constantly feel an urge to be open and honest in kind. “I guess… I guess that’s a part of… A part of…”
“Being in a relationship with someone?” Yuri nodded as Victor finished the thought he was failing at putting together. “Not that I’m an expert by any means, but I would have to say that it’s not a bad thing to be friends with the person you like romantically.”

“I still can’t believe you like me romantically.” Yuri let out a huff of air and pulled their hands back towards him, taking his turn to place a kiss on Victor’s knuckles. “I’m not exactly an expert on relationships either.”

“For two people who don’t know what they’re doing, I have to say things aren’t going terribly.” Victor shifted on the couch so they were closer, pulling Yuri’s legs into his lap as he did so. Yuri allowed himself to be moved, keeping his grip on Victor’s hand tight and resting the back of Victor’s hand against the center of his chest. “For what it’s worth, I can’t believe you like me.”

“I don’t think you understand how ridiculous you sound when you say that.” Even though he knew Victor would protest, Yuri could help but say it.

“Agree to disagree?”

And there Victor went surprising him again. Not protesting and trying to convince Yuri otherwise. Just accepting what Yuri was still too scared to say out loud. That even though there was a dark part of Yuri that would probably always feel as though he wasn’t good enough for Victor, wasn’t smart enough or handsome enough or the right social caste, that part was getting quieter every single day because Yuri wanted this. Wanted moments where they were alone and could be themselves.

“Agree to disagree.”

~

Even after living with it for most of his life, Yuri’s anxiety never failed to surprise him.

It was always popping up out of nowhere when Yuri never in a million years would have thought about being anxious about something. Someone would say something, something that might not even be entirely directed at Yuri, and his head would spin and he would feel short of breath. He would have run through a performance one hundred times and never missed a beat and then the hundred and first time suddenly all he could think about was everything going horribly wrong to the point where he was almost paralyzed with his own fear.
And then there were times when he was so sure he was going to be a trembling, nervous wreck, and nothing happened at all. He would stay calm and collected and the dark part of his mind would leave him alone no matter how much the more sadistic side of him poked at it.

This was one of those times when all signs were pointing that he should be having a mental breakdown, but all his felt was calm. It was like having an out of body experience, if Yuri cared to think about it. Like his body knew what to do even as his rational mind was too preoccupied with trying to sort out exactly why he wasn’t nervous at all to be meeting the Royal Family of Britannia live on an international broadcast in roughly fifteen minutes.

“You seem strangely relaxed today.” Phichit poked Yuri in the shoulder to get his attention and both Yuri and the man next to him turned to look at the dark-skinned man in response. “Am I seriously the only one that’s nervous?”

Chris was standing on Yuri’s left side while Phichit was standing on his right as they settled into their places on top of the steps leading up to the main entrance to the palace. The taller man was radiating his typical ease and amusement with whatever situation he found himself in, while Phichit was bouncing on the balls of his feet and chewing on his thumbnail when he thought no one was looking.

“I’ve moved past nervous into some other plane of existence where nerves are a mythical concept.” Yuri shrugged and tugged at the bottom of his suit jacket, trying to get some space between it and the dress shirt underneath. It still was far too warm for so many layers, but this time they hadn’t been given a choice of attire. “It was bound to happen eventually.”

“Care to give the rest of us the map to that dimension?” Phichit asked, still fidgeting at Yuri’s side. “I can’t get this image out of my head of me tripping on my own two feet and face planting right in front of everyone.”

“As if you haven’t already charmed the pants off every single person who lives here.” Chris leaned around Yuri in order to smirk at Phichit. “If anyone could fall flat on their face in front of the whole world and make it look like you meant to do it the whole time, it would be you.”

“How are you always so calm?” Phichit shot back and Yuri turned to look at Chris as well. He was just as curious to know the answer to that question since, so far, nothing had seemed to take Chris by surprise or even cause him the slightest of pauses. If he was ever nervous about anything, he was better than anyone else at hiding it. “Come on. We’re supposed to be friends. You can tell us your secret.”
“No secret to tell. I’m never anything other than myself.” Chris winked at the both of them and straightened back up, turning his focus down the long drive as he squinted against the glare of the afternoon sun. “The way I see it, if the people who matter don’t like who I am, then they don’t really matter at all.”

Yuri and Phichit exchanged a quick look between the two of them before following Chris’ lead and turned their gazes back down the road. He didn’t have the time to think about what Chris had said right then as the faint outline of several cars could now be seen turning off the winding road that lead to the main drive.

He looked down the steps to where the royal family was waiting on the drive. Victor’s silver hair sparkled in the late summer sun and Yuri could see his profile as he turned and said something that made Yurio, who was standing at his side, growl and kick at the gravel in front of him with the toe of his shoe.

He didn’t know what to expect as the cars pulled up and people began spilling out of them, enough bodies between the Elite and what was going on down below to mostly block his view of the proceedings. Yuri could make out flashes of things, flashes of auburn and brown hair and the sound of female laughter, but most of it was a blur of camera flashes and servants rushing forward to grab piles of luggage from out of the cars and into the palace as quickly as possible.

They were all ushered inside with the luggage, Mila murmuring instructions to them as they went, directing them towards the ballroom where a light lunch was awaiting them.

“We didn’t even get to see them properly.” Phichit sounded as though he hadn’t decided if he wanted to be upset or relieved by that. “I thought we were supposed to meet them. Wasn’t that the whole point of dressing up?”

“You will meet them. Here. In private. Unless you want to go back out there and put on a show?” Mila paused on her way past them, grinning widely as Phichit shook his head in response. “That’s what we thought. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to check on the food.”

“That’s nice. I think that’s the first time they’ve put our comfort over the sake of entertainment.” Leo had hurried over to them once they had stepped into the ballroom and had caught the tail end of Mila’s explanation before the redhead had scurried off to do whatever her job entailed that day.

“That’s because if one of us makes the wrong move in front of the world we could inadvertently start an international incident.” Chris straightens his jacket and tie as he speaks, prompting Yuri to nervously tug at his own clothing just in case. “It’s better for us to properly meet them in private, let
both parties get a lay of the land, and then we can move into more public appearances later in the week.”

“How do you know these things?” There was a hint of suspicion in Phichit’s tone this time and his smile when he looked at Chris rang slightly off.

“Ah, I just ask the right questions to the right people at the right times.” If Chris was put off by Phichit’s blatant mistrust, he didn’t show it at all. “And I always keep my eyes and ears open. You never know what you’re going to hear when you are paying attention to people who aren’t used to being given much attention.”

“Why does it matter where he gets his information?” Despite this not being the first time Chris had intimated knowing far more than he let on, Yuri knew enough himself to recognize when the other man had a point. So far Chris hadn’t overtly used anything he knew against any of the other Elite and Yuri wasn’t sure why he felt like Chris wouldn’t do so, but he did. That and he knew firsthand from speaking with Victor the night before that Chris was right again. “It makes sense.”

“Hmmm.” Phichit frowned and Yuri held his breath. This was the first time since meeting the other man that Yuri had seen him look anything other than chipper and cheerful and the change was jarring, not to mention coming at the worst time imaginable. Before Yuri could try to come up with something else to try to head off the sudden tension before it could escalate, Phichit’s frown melted into a grin. “Fine, but I’ll find out your secret sooner or later, Giacometti. Mark my words.”

“Consider them marked.” With a grin and a wink, Chris brushed aside any lingering tension, allowing Yuri to release the breath he was holding for the time being. “We should go take our places, don’t you think?”

“That was weird.” Leo muttered under his breath as both Chris and Phichit walked away, both of them now chattering happily to each other as though nothing had happened.

“Yes, it was.” Yuri agreed as they both watched their friends go. “I think we’re going to have to worry about it later, though.”

Leo nodded and they moved to go find their assigned spots as well.

There was no more time for preparation or worrying about anything else. They would be meeting the new royals later than they had thought, but still very, very soon.
Yuri’s strange sense of calm and confidence carried him through the twenty minutes they were left waiting alone in the ballroom, which had been filled with long trestle tables servants were rapidly filling with food along one wall as well as smaller tables scattered strategically throughout the open space.

The others seemed to be a mixed bag. Leo was obviously nervous, but Guang Hong and Phichit were working hard to keep him distracted. JJ was his typical loud and obnoxious self, carrying on a conversation with Georgi and Seung-Gil, who were both looking mostly calm even if Yuri did catch their eyes flicking over to the main entrance every so often. Michele and Emil were tucked away in a far corner, Michele looking pale under his tan and Emil muttering something while patting the shorter man on the shoulder. Chris was still hovering around Yuri’s personal bubble, not saying anything, but still exuding that ridiculous aura of calm only he could project with such consistency.

Yuri was about to turn to Chris to ask the other man if there was something he wanted as his hovering was starting to pluck at the frayed edges of Yuri’s nerves, when his attention was caught by a commotion coming from the front of the room.

“Mother and Father will hardly notice any of us missing. They’ve been waiting ages to talk to your parents about running a face lift on some of the provisions in the old treaty. They’ll be occupied with it for hours and you promised I could meet them.” Even over the slight buzz of conversation, the female voice echoed easily through the open space of the room and Yuri perked up as he saw Victor and a young woman step through the doorway.

The voice was familiar, as it should have been he supposed. They had spent the last two weeks studying the Britannian Royal Family after all. A study that included watching old news broadcasts and speeches any one of those members might have given, and, at twenty-one and being the second in line to the throne after her brother, Princess Chloe had her fair share of time in the spotlight.

“I’m not complaining, I’m just making sure we both understand that we’re going to get yelled at by my father later. That’s all. Now, who should I introduce you to first…” Victor had his hand on the small of the princess’ back as they stepped forward. As his words trailed off for a moment, his blue eyes scanned the room and connected with Yuri, his grin widening in recognition as he moved forward again, this time with a clear purpose. “Ah. How about over here?”

Yuri had about ten seconds to take in the princess, from her long auburn hair that was braided and coiled into a bun at the nape of her neck to her green eyes and the freckles that dotted her pale cheeks, before they were both standing right in front of him.
“Hello.” Princess Chloe waved and Yuri immediately dropped down into a deep bow in response, the months of proper etiquette that had been drilled into his brain finally kicking in for once instead of his usual stammer. As he straightened up, he could hear the princess giggle and she gave a small bow in return. “It’s a pleasure to meet you…”

“Yuri. Yuri Katsuki.” He kept a smile on his own face as he took the hand the princess was holding out to him, shaking it firmly before they released each other. “It’s nice to meet you as well, Your Highness.”

“Now, now, in private just Chloe will do.” She turned then, and looked up at where Victor was calmly watching their interaction, a pleasant but frustratingly blank look on his face. “You’re the dancer, aren’t you? Victor’s told me a lot about you.”

“H-He has?” Yuri had been so determined not to stutter or blush, but, as always, his best intentions didn’t always work out for him no matter how determined he was. At least his nerves were still staying well hidden, allowing him to bounce back quickly for once. “I hope he hasn’t been spreading any rumors about us…”

“Yuri!” And then Victor’s carefully crafted expression broke and he laughed as he placed a hand against his heart. “I assure you, I have been the ultimate gentleman!”

“Hmmm… We’ll just have to see about that, won’t we?” Yuri had almost forgotten that Chris had been standing right next to him until his deep voice slid into the conversation almost effortlessly. Yuri watched, more amused than irritated as Chris reached out for Chloe’s hand, dipping into a low bow and bringing it to his mouth to place a gentle kiss on her knuckles. “My lady, after hearing so many wonderful things about you, it is an honor to finally get to put a face to the name.”

“You must be Chris.” Chloe giggled again, pulling her hand back as soon as Chris released it. “Now you, there might be rumors about.”

“Ah, Victor! You wound me.” The three of them laughed at Chris’ purposefully overwrought expression. “Though I am sure it was more truth than fiction, the polite thing to do would be to give me an opportunity to defend myself. An ultimate gentleman indeed!”

“You did tell me he was a funny one. You neglected to tell me he was also charming as well.” Chloe pushed against Victor’s shoulder, slipping from his grasp as she did so.
“Chris can be funny, but I don’t know if I would go so far as to call him charming… Annoying maybe…” Yuri smirked as Chris’ mouth popped open and both Victor and Chloe tried and failed to hide their laughter politely behind their hands.

“I get the feeling we are going to become fast friends, Yuri Katsuki.” The princess winked as she turned and grabbed Victor’s arm, tugging him along behind her. “Come on, we don’t have long before they notice we’re missing. I want to meet the rest… Yuri, Chris, it was delightful to make your acquaintance. I look forward to getting to spend more time with you later!”

Victor grinned at Yuri over his shoulder as he allowed himself to be drug away and towards where Phichit, Leo, and Guang Hong were watching them, perking up as they realized they were going to be the next to meet the princess.

“She seems fun.” Chris was watching them go as well. “Looks like this next week just got a whole hell of a lot more interesting.”

With that, Chris clapped Yuri on the back and strode off towards one of the buffet tables, turning his million dollar smile onto a servant that was standing guard there and wheedling one of the tarts she was supposed to be protecting out of her. Well, at least he didn’t seem upset by the fact that Yuri had taken a dig at him in front of royalty.

He had to admit that Chris was probably right again.

It was going to be a very interesting week.

~

By the time dinner rolled around, Yuri’s missing anxiety was starting to creep back up on him. It didn’t help that the planned luncheon had ended almost as soon as it had begun, with the Britannians putting in only the briefest of appearances before excusing themselves with the excuse of wanting to rest from their long journey.

He thought he had been prepared for the dinner. It was supposed to be a quiet affair, private as opposed to the large formal dinner and ball that would be held the next evening, but, instead of the small separate tables he’d expected there to be, there was a massive circular table instead, large enough to fit everyone except the pair of ruling regents who had place settings at the high table as
was King Yakov and Queen Lilia’s habit.

Yuri pinched the outside of his thigh through his pocket in an attempt to get himself to focus. The room might not have been set up the way he’d expected it to be, but it wasn’t any different from the way it had been for the last month or so. Sure, the table was larger and there were four extra places that hadn’t been there before, but that didn’t mean this meal had to be any different than any of the others.

Well, aside from the fact that he desperately wanted to impress the four new people at the table.

He hadn’t realized he’d been hoping for Victor to be seated next to him until he felt the all too familiar swoop of disappointment when he didn’t see his name on the seat to either side of Victor’s. Circling the table, that feeling only intensified when he caught sight of whose was sitting next to his.

To his left would be Emil, which wasn’t too terrible. He liked Emil well enough and the other man got along with pretty much everyone. He was also excellent at keeping the conversation flowing so even if Yuri faltered once or twice he knew Emil would be quick to come to his rescue without a second thought or any judgement.

It wasn’t Emil’s name that cause the coil of dread to tighten in the pit of his stomach. It was the name that was placed to the right of his. Princess Chloe.

Yuri still didn’t know what to think about the princess. Victor had said she was the closest thing he had to a best friend, and it was clear even from the brief moment he’d seen them together that they were more at ease with each other than Yuri had seen Victor with anyone else. Out of everyone, he already knew he wanted to impress Chloe the most. If she was someone that was important to Victor, then Yuri wanted to put forth his best self.

Of course, that meant he was probably going to try way to had and make a massive fool of himself in the process.

He wasn’t given much time to let his panic get rolling as the others were all filing in and taking their places, the visiting royals being the last to arrive, the entire room shooting to their feet and bowing as both royal families came into the room together and found their way to their own seats. As Chloe settled into her seat next to him, Yuri’s thoughts frantically scrabbled for something interesting to say. Some way to start the conversation that wouldn’t leave him looking like an incompetent moron.
It turned out that Yuri didn’t have to worry much at all as JJ was seated on the other side of the princess and he did not waste time getting her attention and drawing her into one of his long-winded tales of his experiences at various photo shoots.

With Chloe occupied on his one side and Emil chatting happily with Georgi on his other, Yuri ended up drawn into a conversation between Guang Hong and the twins from Britannia diagonal from him, but not so far across the table that it was too terribly awkward.

“So you have all been at the palace for three months now?” Prince Ethan asked curiously, looking back and forth between Guang Hong and Yuri as though he wasn’t sure where the answer to his question would be coming from. Ethan and his sister Princess Eva were carbon copies of each other, brown hair, hazel eyes and tanned skinned that was marked with the same freckles Chloe wore.

“Just about.” Yuri provided as he reached for his glass of water, taking a sip and placing it back once he was done. “Sometimes it feels like we’ve been here longer than that, though.”

“I can imagine.” Eva nudged her twin in the side and he handed up the butter dish that was sitting by his elbow without her even having to ask exactly what she was looking for. “It’s an interesting system, but I think it has some merits. It does seem to make matters more fair since your prince is legally required to marry someone from your own country.”

“You should have more parties, though.” Ethan stated as he received the butter dish back from his sister and set about spreading some on his own roll. “I remember when Alex went through his big debut season. We went to a party almost every night. It was so much fun.”

“There will be a ball tomorrow night.” Guang Hong pointed out, his voice raised slightly higher than its usual softer timber in order to keep Yuri in the conversation despite his distance. “I’m sure it will be fun, but I’m not sure most of us would be up for so many in a row…”

Yuri nodded along with his friend. That actually sounded a lot like his own worst nightmare come to life and, from what he knew about Guang Hong’s own shyness, he would have to say he wasn’t the only one who would have removed himself from the proceedings if that had been what had been expected of them. Hoping to put the topic of the conversation off them and the Selection process Yuri cut in with a question. “Prince Alex found his fiancée during his debut, correct?”

“Yes.” Eva was nodding enthusiastically now, as though merely the thought of a large ball was exciting enough for her. “It’s our tradition. When the Crown Prince, or Princess if the case may be, turns eighteen, he or she debuts into our society through a summer of balls and parties and other large scale events. Anyone in the entire country, plus foreign guests, can attend with the goal of catching
their attention. The end of the season always ends with a proposal."

“Lady Iylliana wanted to come with us so badly, but the end of their mandatory fie year engagement will be next summer and she still has a lot to do to plan the wedding, plus with Angelique so ill, it helped to leave someone she liked behind to keep her company.” Ethan commented idly. “Of course, our debuts will be considerably smaller and we’ve already basically been contracted into engagements since we were toddlers, but we’re still looking forward to our turn.”

“They have to wait five years to get married?” The question was out of Yuri’s mouth before he could stop and consider if it was rude or not. From the expression on Guang Hong’s face, the other man was about as surprised as he was to hear that.

“Of course!” Chloe must have been listening in on their conversation and had found an opportunity to politely excuse herself from JJ because she was looking only at them now, green eyes landing on Yuri in a way that made him want to hunch his shoulders and stare at the tablecloth. “Lady Iylliana is going to be our queen someday, not to mention stuck with our brother for the rest of her life. Five years is plenty of time for them to get used to each other as well as for her to learn what her duties will be. A summer of parties with ever changing guests is not exactly the best metric for determining compatibility, don’t you think?”

“That does makes sense.” And it did, though Yuri wasn’t sure how they had come up with five years as the magic number. He hadn’t thought about it much, but he was sure if he did accept Victor’s proposal sometime in the future, they weren’t exactly going to have a lengthy engagement. From what he recalled, once the Selection was over there was barely a month between the engagement and the wedding. Not a lot of time to back out if a mistake had been made.

Once they got that far, if they got that far, there wasn’t going to be any going back.

“Did you have a debut as well?” Chloe had not turned back to JJ and Yuri noticed Guang Hong’s conversation with the twins had moved on without him so he focused on the princess next to him.

“I did. It’s tradition for any royals, even if only one of us is using it as a vehicle to find a spouse. Even if they knew they weren’t going to get a chance to marry me, it was still a good chance for some of our people to get to meet me and I enjoyed getting to spend time with them as well. I might not be the de facto heir to the throne, but there are still things I can do to help my parents and Alex in the future.” Chloe was beaming now and Yuri felt some of his unease settle. “What about you? Have you been enjoying your time here so far?”

“There certainly haven’t been many dull moments, I can say that.” Yuri thought that was a nice
statement that stayed firmly in the middle ground. Even if they hadn’t been surrounded by tons of people, Yuri didn’t actually know the answer to that question. Sometimes he thought he was, sometimes it felt like the walls were closing in on him, but it wasn’t like he could just come out and say that. No matter how nice the princess was or how much Yuri liked her. “They keep us busy for the most part and there is a lot for us to learn.”

“I would imagine so.” Chloe’s smile softened. “Parties are fun, but I think I like this a bit more. Getting the chance to actually get to know someone beyond just an evening or two. Seeing them when the gowns are off and they can’t hide behind strategic lighting in a ballroom somewhere. Like this…” Here she gestured towards the table where everyone was eating their meal and conversing happily. “It’s much more relaxing to spend time with people you care about over a good meal.”

“I agree. No matter what happens once this is all over I do know that I’ll end up with far more friends than I came in here with.” That was somehow easier to admit than it had ever been before. As hard as it was to imagine how his life was before he’d come to the palace, it was somewhere harder to think that three months ago he didn’t know any of the people here. It felt like they’d been there his whole life. “I’m kind of glad Victor didn’t set out to find a spouse through an endless round of parties. I’m pretty sure I never would have met him in that case.”

“I did get the feeling that you might not be the party type. Not that there’s anything wrong with that! Alex hated his debut for the first month until he met Iylliana. He definitely would have been more suited to this kind of quiet courtship.” Chloe raised an eyebrow at him and Yuri shifted a bit in his seat. “He showed up to like one party during my entire debut season and he ended up going to bed before ten anyway.”

“And you didn’t find anyone you liked during your debut?” Yuri wasn’t sure if that was a question he should be asking, but he couldn’t help it. Chloe didn’t seem offended and she was so easy to talk to he almost forgot that she was royalty.

“I wasn’t looking.” Chloe waved her hand gracefully through the air. “The price of not being the first born. I’ve been promised to someone from the royal family of New Asia since before I could walk. They haven’t quite decided who yet, but once they do I’m supposed to be one of the first to know.”

“Oh… I didn’t… I didn’t know…”

“Don’t worry, Yuri. I’m not offended. It is what it is.” Chloe shrugged and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ve had more than enough time to adjust. That is what having extra children is for in our world, after all. Strengthening ties with potential allies and friends. It’s actually kind of funny. If Victor had an older sibling to the be the Crown Prince instead and our sexual preferences actually aligned, we’d probably already be planning our own wedding.”
“R-Really?” Yuri was torn between desperately wanting to change the subject and wanting to hear every last word Chloe wanted to say.

“No.” Chloe shrugged again. “Our parents are very keen to have an alliance with Illéa forged through marriage. With the twin or with one of our cousins perhaps. Whatever works out the best for both parties. It’ll happen sooner or later, it’s just not going to happen with me.”

At that moment Chris grabbed Chloe’s attention from across the table and she turned away from Yuri and towards him, leaving Yuri alone and without a conversation partner for a brief moment. A moment he was glad for as a sudden thought had struck him, leaving his mind whirring and his body cold with shock.

It felt as though there were two threads running around each other deep in his subconscious, waiting for Yuri to find a way to grab them and connect them so he could see the full picture. At a loss for something to do, he looked around the table in the hopes of catching someone’s attention enough to slip back into the flow of conversation somewhere. He’d found that his anxiety had less of a chance to grab a foothold if he was distracted by something or someone else.

As his eyes scanned the table, he noticed Yurio on the far side. The teen was quiet, barely saying more than a word or two whenever someone would try to talk to him. His arms were crossed over his chest and his head was turned downwards so his blonde hair hung over his face, adding another layer between himself and the rest of the world. Yuri honestly hadn’t seen the younger boy sulk quite so obviously in over a month and it only took him half a second to realize why.

Victor wasn’t allowed to marry someone from outside of the country and King Yakov didn’t have any brothers or sisters so there would be convenient nieces and nephews hanging around. If there was to be marriage contract between the two countries, there was really only one option.

Chloe might have come to terms with what was expected of her, but it was clear Yurio hadn’t.

And Yuri couldn’t blame him one bit.
Surprises

Chapter Notes

Surprise! To make up for the last chapter kind of being a transitional chapter and not having a lot happening, this chapter is over 11K words and is full of, well, surprises! Whew...

Also... Holy shit, guys. My silly, little story has over 1,800 kudos... I'm honestly kind of speechless. You guys are the best! I never in a million years imagined such a fantastic response to this. I'm so glad you are all loving it just as much as I do!

Chapter 17 – Surprises

“I’d think with everything you have scheduled today, that you would somehow find a way to wake up marginally on time, but you live to prove me wrong, don’t you?”

Yuri groaned and rolled over as Minako pulled apart his curtains in order to let in the bright morning sunlight. Knowing his covers were about to be brutally ripped away from him, Yuri buried his head directly into the sheets underneath his pillow instead in preparation.

It was a losing battle. He fought it every morning and hadn't won a round with Minako yet. Knowing he wasn’t going to win didn’t stop him from trying to fight for an extra five minutes all the same.

“One of these days I am going to just leave you here.” Minako sighed heavily and Yuri could sense her hovering over him even if he didn’t want to come out from under his pillow and confirm it “I should do it today, but there’s a surprise waiting for all of you down at breakfast and you are going to owe me big time for making sure you are awake and presentable enough to receive it.”

“A surprise?” That caught Yuri’s attention. At least enough to come out and blink at Minako’s hazy form. “What surprise?”

“You’re going to have to get up and get dressed and find out for yourself.” Seeing that Yuri was more or less upright, Minako hummed to herself as she skipped over to Yuri’s closet in order to pull out something for him to wear that day. “Prince Victor would kill me if I ruined it for you.”
Yuri forced himself to sit up and turn so that his bare feet were resting on the soft carpet beneath him.
“You can’t give me a hint?”

“Well, I know what it is and I can safely say you are going to like it a lot.” Minako looked over her shoulder and winked at where Yuri was fumbling to grab his glasses from the nightstand and place them on his face so the room would no longer be completely blurry. “Alright. This outfit should do, and Mila did leave me a note this morning to request you wear your contacts today since there are going to be cameras on the grounds for most of the day…”

Yuri only half focused on what Minako was saying as he took the offered set of clothes from her and made his way into the bathroom, closing himself off from her idle chatter by closing the door behind him. As much as he loved his attendant, she was often far too chipper in the mornings when he was at his grumpiest and he was too busy trying to figure out what could be waiting for them downstairs to really want to focus much on anything else.

Minako had made it sound like the surprise was for everyone. Despite trying his best not to, Yuri couldn’t help but wrack his brain for something that could be considered as a good surprise for ten people who had very different tastes. Nothing immediately came to mind and Yuri found himself dressed and letting Minako in to help him get ready the rest of the way before he’d been able to come up with any kind of guess.

Of course, knowing Victor, it could have been anything, so even if he had a guess, there was a very high chance it wouldn’t have come close.

With Minako poking and prodding him and his own growing excitement causing him to move a bit faster than he usually did in the mornings, Yuri was not one of the last ones to stumble out of his room for once. Although he wasn’t able to get far as they were blocked at the head of the stairs by a pair of servants who either had strict orders not to speak to them or simply chose not to.

“Yuri! You’re up bright and early for you.” Phichit was an insufferable morning person, so Yuri was not surprised in the slightest to see the other man bouncing around the hall, going up on his tiptoes to try and see over the heads of the servants blocking the way. “What do you think they’re hiding down there?”

“I have no idea.” Yuri accepted Phichit’s excited hug, shrugging as soon as the other man let him go. “Minako wouldn’t say anything other than it’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“Darn. I thought Victor might have told you something.” Phichit didn’t actually seem upset at all with Yuri not having the answer. In fact, he seemed as excited as he always was.
“Well, he didn’t tell me this.” When Phichit raised an eyebrow at him, Yuri sighed heavily. “I promise. I don’t know anything about it. Didn’t even have a hint that it was coming. He honestly tells me less than people seem to think he does. I get the feeling he enjoys surprising us.”

“Fair enough.” Phichit laughed and glanced around at where the hall was steadily starting to fill up, men grumbling in confusion as they found their way blocked. “No one else seems to have a clue either. Even Chris looks confused for a change.”

“About damn time, too.” Yuri jumped a bit at the new voice and turned slightly to see that JJ had stepped out of his room just in time to hear the tail end of their conversation. “That guy knows way too much sometimes. Freaks me out.”

“I’m sure he’s harmless.” Yuri wasn’t actually sure why he was so certain of that. He could count on one hand the number of things he really knew about Chris, but that was the way he felt none the less, as stupid as that might end up to be. “I’d be willing to bet that he doesn’t know as much as he lets on. He probably just acts like he does and hopes no one calls him out on it.”

“Ah, Yuri. Ever the diplomat.” JJ plastered his usual broad grin across his face and nodded his head towards the stairs. “Looks like they’re ready to let us down now.”

There was some movement from the head of the stairway and Yuri was able to see the servants motioning for them to all come closer.

“Whatever it is, they don’t want any one of us to see it before the others.” Phichit pointed out as they fell into line towards the back of the group, JJ elbowing past them in his eagerness to be closer to the front. “At least we don’t have to worry about anyone getting their feelings hurt this time around since it looks like we’re all getting the same thing.”

Yuri nodded in agreement as they made their way down the stairs. He expected them to be steered towards the dining hall as they had been the night before, but they were corralled towards the ballroom instead. From what he could hear it sounded like there were a lot of people already in the room, their combined voices drifting out of where the double doors had been thrown wide open.

Phichit nudged his shoulder in excitement as they stepped forward and were able to get a good look at what was waiting for them.
At first, Yuri wasn’t entirely sure what he was supposed to be looking for. The ballroom was the largest room in the palace and it usually was mostly empty, even when it had been converted for various other purposes, there were always large areas of the room that were left empty and open. This morning, there was less empty space and more people there than Yuri had ever even seen present in the room before. Even the massive floor to ceiling glass doors had been left open so people could come and go from the attached terrace and to allow the cool morning breeze to blow through the room.

Aside from catching a glimpse of Victor’s distinctive silver hair from across the room, Yuri wasn’t sure he even recognized anyone present and he was tempted to take a step back out into the foyer behind him in order to gather his bearings and try to figure out exactly what he was stepping into.

Just as he took a solid step back, he paused, a familiar sounding squeal echoing even with the extra bodies in the room. Before he knew it there was a large blur that shot towards him, and a sudden pressure around his knees, wrapping around him and leaving him wobbling in place trying to catching his balance and not go falling back onto his ass.

“Yuri!”

“Axel? Lutz? Loop? What are you three doing here?”

For that was exactly who it was with their chubby arms wrapped around his legs. The triplets, hair tied back with their signature colored bows and wearing dresses that looked new and pressed, black shoes polished and shiny. They were grinning up at him and giggling even as he felt a sharp tug as his heart started to beat harder in his chest.

“We were invited.” Axel pulled back, tugging on her sisters’ collars as she did so. “The prince invited all of us. Personally. Mom said so.”

“Come on! We’ve been waiting for you forever.” Lutz had grabbed his hand and pulled him along with them. “They wouldn’t let us eat anything until you got here. Not even toast!”

“Lutz still stole a piece when they weren’t looking.” Loop whispers up at him, ignoring where her sister was now sending her a betrayed look. “Hurry! Mom and Dad and Mari want to see you, too!”

O-Oh…” Yuri had been so shocked to see the triplets there he hadn’t immediately realized that meant the rest of his family must have been there as well. He looked around the room, catching sight
of them off to one side, his parents and Mari deep in conversation with Victor as the triplets continued to drag him across the room.

“Yuri!” His mother saw him first and the triplets scurried out of the way as she stopped whatever she had been saying mid-sentence in order to grab Yuri and pull him into a fierce hug. One that Yuri accepted gratefully. They had never been a particularly physical household, but he knew he need the touch just as much as his mother did in that moment. “Oh, Yuri! You look amazing. Better even than when you left!”

Yuri’s mother stepped back, still keeping her hands firmly on his biceps. “Still too skinny, though. They look like they have more than enough food here for you. You need to eat more.”

“Mom…” Yuri groaned, but he couldn’t have removed the smile from his face even if he wanted to. “I’m eating just fine. I can’t believe you’re here!”

“And I can’t believe you actually look halfway decent without those massive frames of yours.” Mari clapped him on the shoulder before reaching out with her other hand and flicking at the gel that held back his bangs. “Who knew there was a stud hiding under that dorky exterior?”

“Mari!” Yuri tried to frown, but ended up laughing instead. “I missed you, too.”

It was then that Yuri noticed Victor hovering on the outskirts of their mini-family reunion.

“Was this your idea?” He aimed the question over his mother’s head and Victor smiled sheepishly, shifting from one foot to the other in an uncharacteristic display of nerves.

“I… I thought that you’d all been away from your families for long enough.” Victor shrugged, the motion just as graceful as all his gestures were. “This seemed like an excellent time to bring everyone together. I had hoped it might make everyone enjoy the ball a bit more to have some familiar faces around.”

Yuri’s mother had let go of him by then and Yuri took a step forward, reaching out as he did to place a hand on Victor’s shoulder. Some part of him was dimly aware of his family staring at him, but he didn’t care. Victor might not have done this just for Yuri, but he didn’t have to. He had done it for all of them. Because he’d wanted to. Because he thought they would like to have their families with them for a time.
Because he was a good person with a kind heart.

Because he was someone who genuinely wanted to give something to them that they hadn’t even asked for.

“It’s the best surprise you’ve given us yet.” There was a beat when Yuri’s eyes met Victor’s where the world narrowed down into that one point. He hoped Victor would be able to catch all the little things that Yuri wanted to say but couldn’t, both because of their location and because he wasn’t sure he had the words just yet.

If the way Victor’s face softened and he reached up to place his hand over Yuri’s on his shoulder and squeezed softly was any indication, Yuri was sure his message had been received.

The moment barely lasted for a second before Yuri pulled his hand back and reached out to twine his arm with his mother’s.

“I see you’ve met my family…”

“Yes!” Victor was quick to shift back into his bright, bubbly self. His spine straightened and his shoulders rose. His head even tilted a bit to one side as his smile stretched just a tiny bit more. Right on the razor’s edge of being his ‘out in the public eye’ smile, but Yuri did notice that it stopped just short, like some kind of odd mix of the Victor Yuri had gotten to know over the past few months and the prince he had to be whenever other eyes were looking. “We were just debating on whether or not you were the cause of the Elite’s delayed appearance. It seems as though you have a difficult time getting out of bed in the mornings…”

“W-What?” Yuri turned to where both his parents and Mari were now grinning at him, Mari’s more mischievous than the others, but it was still very obvious they were all in on it. “I do not!”

“Yes, you do, little brother.” Yuri bit the inside of his cheek as Mari ruffled his hair. All his many months of lessons about how to behave in polite society said it was not a good idea to push or pinch his older sister, no matter how much he wanted to or how much she deserved it. “It’s actually super adorable. He’ll curl up into this little ball under the covers and roll around like a pill bug whenever you poke him.”

“I do not!” This time Yuri did push her. Manners be damned. “Mari!”
By now Victor and his parents were laughing and Yuri could feel his face burning. As glad as he was to have his family there, real and solid and able to reach out to them in a way he hadn’t been able to for so long, he was forcibly reminded of all the things they knew about him. Things he was sure Victor would have found out eventually, but still… Exactly how long had they been down there waiting for him?

“Unless he had a dance lesson scheduled we were lucky to see him out of his room before noon when he was a teenager.” Yuri’s father cut in, and Yuri groaned and fought back the urge to bury his face in his hands. Even his dad was going to betray him now? “He found some black-out fabric in a costume bin when he was fourteen and learned how to sew just so that he could turn them into curtains since the window in his room faced east.”

“You know, I can always ask Minako for confirmation on your morning habits…” Victor winked and Yuri heard the triplets giggle from behind his legs. “I look forward to hearing many, many more stories about you, but I really should make some rounds. It was a pleasure meeting all of you in person. I’ll try to find some time to see you again at lunch?”

“You’ll be glad if you do.” Mari stated cheerfully, tapping the bag that was resting on her hip. “We brought pictures!”

Victor’s face instantly melted into a look of complete and utter excitement. So much so that a huge part of Yuri felt a strong impulse to grab Mari’s bag and shove it at Victor right then and there, whatever it took to keep that expression on his face for even a few seconds longer, even as the rest of him panicked at the thought of exactly which pictures they had thought to bring with them. The latent embarrassment won out, however, as Yuri realized he had no idea exactly which photos had been deemed important enough to make the trip.

Knowing his mother, it was probably all of them.

Grappling his impulses back under control he forced himself to wave Victor off, mumbling something about him needing to socialize and seeing him later. He did not, however, miss the weighted look Victor sent him as he left. A look Yuri was becoming more and more adept as interpreting as Victor trying to let him know that the last thing he wanted to do was leave and that he would be back the very first moment he could.

“You two look cute together. Much cuter in person than on television, too.” Yuri knew Mari was teasing, and he stuck his tongue out at her in retaliation. “Come on. Don’t be such a spoilsport.”

“Mom, you didn’t really bring pictures, did you?” Yuri turned to look back at where his mother was
smiling brightly as she was guiding the triplets towards the breakfast buffet that had been set out, warning them not to take too much on their first trip in case they didn’t like something.

“Why wouldn’t we have?” Hiroko pat Loop on the head as they skipped off before turning back to Yuri and adjusting her glasses. “And I’m glad we did. Prince Victor seemed very excited to get a chance to see them.”

He knew from the way Mari had an eyebrow quirked that he didn’t need to ask which ones she’d thought to bring any longer. He had a sudden urge to try and grab the bag from his sister and utilize one of the many palace fireplaces to burn it, but he was wise enough to know he wouldn’t get far.

This was going to simultaneously be the best and worst day of his life.

~

They had been kicked out of the ballroom about an hour after breakfast had begun in order to give the staff time to decorate for the ball that would be held that evening. It was a beautiful day, still hot but finally bordering on the edge of being enjoyable instead of stifling, and all the doors at the back of the palace had been flung open to allow all the guests to come and go freely. Several massive, white tents dotted the rolling expanse of the lawns that led up to the gardens and there were plenty of fans and tables and chairs under there for those who were seeking relief from the sun.

On the terrace there was a flurry of motion as servants began to set up the tables that would hold the food for when lunch started and the entire outdoor space was filled with people moving around in groups of varying sizes.

Victor had invited the immediate family of every single one of the Elite, no matter how large or small they were. The Britannian contingent was out and about as well, introducing themselves to the newcomers and conversing with them easily. Yuri had even seen both sets of kings and queens make a round of the grounds about thirty minutes prior, though they had kept their visit short and hadn’t spent more than a minute or two with any one group before retiring back to somewhere inside the palace for more talks and meetings.

“Yuri and I are best friends. Have been since the first day, right Yuri?” Phichit and his family had joined Yuri and his parents and Mari under one of the tents closer to where the garden began.

“Right.” Yuri nodded enthusiastically. “We actually met at the airport and flew out here together on
Phichit’s father had stayed home in order to look over the grocery the family owned, but Phichit was the oldest of four and all three of his younger siblings as well as his mother had made the trip and were sitting across from the small table they had claimed for their own. The older of the two younger siblings, Phichit’s brother and sister, sat with them, but the youngest, a girl who was only two years older than the triplets had run off with them and some other younger children to play tag on an open stretch of grass nearby.

“Wasn’t the plane ride cool?” Phichit’s brother was thirteen, but had refused to run off with any of the younger children, stating he was old enough to be able to stay with the adults. “When I looked out the window I couldn’t even see the ground most of the time!”

“It was amazing. I took so many pictures!” Phichit exchanged a high five with his brother. “We can go up to my room later and I’ll show them to you. I’ve taken thousands since I’ve been here... I’ve only been able to develop a few, though. They don’t exactly have a darkroom on site here.”

“Achara was so scared the whole time. She didn’t look out the window once.” Phichit’s younger brother, Yuri was pretty sure he’d been introduced as Chatri, flicked a pebble towards his older sister, who merely frowned and flicked one right back. Her aim was considerably better and the stone hit the younger boy right in the middle of his forehead. “Ow! Mom! Achara hit me with a rock.”

“You shouldn’t have tried to hit her first.” Phichit’s mother barely looked up from the cup of tea she was sipping and was deep into her conversation with Yuri’s mother and father again without skipping a beat.

“Stop being mean, Chatri.” Phichit frowned as he poked his younger brother in the side as it looked as though he was about to grab the pebble that had hit him from off the table in order to try again. “I was kind of scared when I was on the plane, too.”

“You did fine. No one could tell you were nervous at all.” Yuri was quick to reassure his friend.

“You slept for half the trip.” Phichit shot back and both of his siblings turned to look at Yuri with wide eyes.

“You were really able to sleep?” Achara was now looking at him with a mixture of something close
to fear and respect. “Even though you were so high up?”

“It wasn’t exactly my first time on a plane. I’m sure you did far better than I did and you are much younger than I was my first time.” Yuri wasn’t exaggerating. He’d been a mess when he’d gotten on a plane for the first time to fly out to join the National Ballet. He’d almost had a panic attack in his seat twice, though he was sure that had more to do with leaving his family and his entire life behind to start from scratch in a strange place with strange people more than any latent fear of flying. “Now that you’ve done it once, next time you’ll have no problem at all.”

Achara seemed to feel a bit better, enough so that she was able to tease her younger brother back when he started trying to tease her about being star struck when they’d met the royal family that morning before the Elite had been allowed downstairs. Phichit jumped in to moderate before the mini argument could get too far out of a hand, slipping into a role Yuri got the feeling he was very used to playing.

Taking the moment, Yuri looked around. It was different to see the grounds so full of life and laughter. He was used to them being empty and quiet apart from the clockwork rotations of the guards making their rounds.

It felt good to see them this way. To see people out and about and enjoying themselves. Even though Yuri typically liked to avoid large gatherings and social functions where he didn’t know a fair chunk of those invited, he still almost wished this was something that happened more often. The palace looked like it had been made for events like this and Yuri was sure it didn’t get used for this purpose nearly enough.

Mari had gone off somewhere, stating she was going to find a bathroom even though Yuri was certain she was really off to find a place to grab a quick smoke, and she wasn’t back yet. He kept an eye out for her blonde tips as he looked around at the crowds.

The tent closest to them had been claimed by Georgi, JJ, Seung-Gil and their families. Surprisingly, both Georgi and JJ came from large ones. Georgi had four older brothers and JJ was the middle child out of four with a younger sister and two older brothers. They were having a spirited conversation with Seung-Gil, who was apparently an only child, while their parents stood on the outskirts, conversing while sipping their own drinks, occasionally putting in a word when the young adults’ conversation began to get too rowdy.

Up the sloping lawn, children ranging in ages from six to twelve were running around playing games. Younger brothers and sisters of the Elite and even a few grandchildren of older siblings. There were about fourteen of them in all and the only ones Yuri was able to recognize from a distance were the triplets, their bright bows causing them to stand out among the crowd even though they were the smallest and the youngest.
On the terrace Guang Hong, Leo, and Emil were pointing out things to their own families. Yuri could make out Emil’s sweeping hand gestures as they all looked towards the gardens or back up at the palace or out towards where the guardhouse was hidden behind a copse of trees. He didn’t have to be able to see their faces to know they were enjoying themselves.

The last he had seen of Michele and his twin sister and their parents had been right after they’d been kicked out of the ballroom, but he remembered the other man muttering something about wanting to show them the library, so he figured they were still inside somewhere.

As for the royals, the princes and princess from Britannia were scattered throughout. Yuri caught sight of Ethan and Eva up on the terrace, the twins talking to some servants as they rushed back and forth with their duties. Prince Alex was at the tent next to them, carrying on a quiet conversation with Seung-Gil underneath the raucous debate between JJ and Georgi’s siblings and Princess Chloe had been over by the children, calling out encouragements to them periodically as they played, but she was gone now. Maybe she had retreated back inside or had wandered somewhere Yuri couldn’t see from his vantage point.

Yuri hadn’t seen Yurio since breakfast and he was sure without having to ask or even go looking that the younger prince was holed up somewhere sulking. He’d been in a bad mood for the past few days and he hadn’t looked up for socializing earlier.

And Victor… The last Yuri had seen of Victor, he’d been engaged in conversation with Chris and his father, the trio heading off towards the gardens. They either hadn’t come out yet, or if they had and Yuri hadn’t caught where they’d gone from there, but he was sure Victor would turn up on time for the meal as he’d promised.

Before Yuri can even begin to wonder what kinds of things they could be talking about, Phichit drew his attention back.

“Your little sisters have way too much energy for being such small human beings.” His siblings arguing quietly on their own for now, Phichit was looking at where the children had now built a kind of fort out of some stolen chairs. The triplets were clearly in charge of the effort, Axel sitting towards the top of the fort and Lutz and Loop directing the construction from the ground. “They kind of scare me.”

“They kind of scare me, too. They’ve grown into little terrors while I was away.” Yuri had only spent about a month at home before being whisked away for the Selection, but in that time he had more than learned how formidable the triplets could be when they were either up to no good or wanted something. “Whatever their power source is, I’m fairly certain it’s not human.”
Almost as though summoned, Lutz broke away from the main group and sprinted across the lawn and towards their table.

“Yuri! We need your chairs.” Chubby hands reached out and pulled at the backs of Yuri’s and Phichit’s chairs.

“Lutz, leave Yuri alone. There are plenty of empty chairs around here.” Yuri’s mother broke away from her conversation for a moment to give Lutz a stern look.

“I know, but we need these chairs.” The girl shot back, looking up at Yuri with wide eyes. “Please, Yuri?”

“Are you planning on carrying our chairs back there all by yourself?” Yuri asked, very certain he already knew the answer, but willing to play the game for now.

“I could if I wanted to.” Lutz waved a small hand through the air. “But it you wanted to help….”

“What kind of gentlemen would we be if we ignored a beautiful lady in need.” Phichit stated and he popped to his feet, giving the young girl a dramatically low bow. “Come on, my friend. It seems they need our help.”

Yuri went willingly, dragging his own chair across the lawn and following Axel’s directions with where to place it. A place that was just out of reach of any of the children gathered. He took a step back once they were done to admire their work. It was a wobbly structure at best, but it was only two chairs high and not likely to cause any injuries so long as no one crashed through it.

“It’s perfect!” A little girl with long dark hair, Yuri didn’t know he name but he recognized her as the daughter of Georgi’s oldest brother, clapped her hands and grinned. “You were right Loop. It’ll be the perfect home base.”

“Home base?” Neither Yuri nor Phichit had bothered to ask exactly why they were building a fort out of chairs and table cloths and now Yuri was starting to wish they had.

“Yup. In case anyone gets tired and needs to sit down for a minute somewhere safe.” The little girl grinned and gave Yuri a look that he instinctively knew to mean they had fallen for the children’s trap. The girl lunged forward and poked Yuri in the middle of his chest, giggling as she hopped
backwards, the other children scattering around her. “You’re it!”

“You’re it?” Phichit asked, looking at Yuri with an eyebrow raised. Yuri saw his opening and he took it, reaching out and tapping his friend on the shoulder before dancing back.

“Nope. You are.”

“You get back here, Katsuki! That was a cheap trick!”

Yuri lost track of how long they ran around with the children. At some point he noticed more and more people join the game. First, Chatri and Achara joined in, apparently figuring if two grown adults were willing to play children’s games, then they suddenly weren’t too old to do so any longer. Then princess Chloe was there, back from wherever she had been before and, seeing the game was no longer exclusively for kids, she threw herself into the fray with a loud squeal.

He wasn’t sure at what point it happened, but as he came around a tree and prepared to sprint across an open bit of yard he felt a tap on his back as Mari tagged him, smirking as she dashed off, sticking her tongue out at him as she went. He ended up tagging JJ that time, though he wasn’t sure when the other man had entered the game either, or if he even had. Yuri had to admit that in retrospect he might have just been wandering around, but he didn’t seem put out about being tagged and immediately began chasing after the triplets without a complaint.

Even Yurio ended up drug into the game. The blonde prince had turned up about twenty minutes in, glowering from the terrace and Yuri hadn’t even paused to give it a second thought before running up and tugging him along.

It helped when one of the triplets tagged Yurio and loudly pronounced him as ‘it’ and he realized that now meant he had carte blanche to chase down JJ in an effort to push him down.

It was fun in a way Yuri hadn’t expected. He never had been one for playing too many games, even when he’d been younger. He’d always been too focused, too intent on taking the next step to get him to where he wanted to be to allow himself to be distracted. But now, even though he was under arguably the most pressure he’d ever found himself under in his entire life, running around with his shirt sleeves rolled up and a grass stain on the knee of his tailored slacks was exactly the breath of fresh air he hadn’t even realized he’d needed.

As much as he wanted to, Yuri couldn’t go on forever, and he ended up plopping down into one of
the chairs at the home base to catch his breath for a moment.

“Wow. I haven’t had this much fun in ages.” Chloe dropped down into the seat next to him as soon as he was settled and she grinned as she handed him an unopened water bottle, taking her own in hand and twisting off its top to take a long swig as soon as he’d accepted his. “Makes me wish I was about ten years younger, though. My legs feel like they’re on fire.”

“Nothing shows you how out of shape you really are than trying to keep up with a child.” Yuri agreed, taking a drink from his own bottle. The water inside was cool and he sighed happily as it hit his stomach. He wiped some sweat from off his forehead and recapped the bottle and tucked it behind his neck in order to help cool off his hot skin. “It is fun, though. I can’t remember the last time I ran around like this.”

And he really couldn’t. He ran all the time. To keep in shape, to improve his stamina, to build the strength in his legs to in order to jump higher and move faster.

But he couldn’t remember the last time he’d just run. For fun. With no goal in mind other than to hear himself and others laugh.

“You get along well with them.” Chloe pointed out, copying him and placing her own bottle of water against the nape of her neck, right beneath her ponytail. “I’m sure having triplets as younger sisters have given you plenty of practice.”

“And you can’t tell. You do well with them.” Chloe sighed as she stretched her legs out in front of her. “I’ll bet you’ll do great with a little one of your own one of these days.”

“Well, you can’t tell. You do well with them.” Chloe sighed as she stretched her legs out in front of her. “I’ll bet you’ll do great with a little one of your own one of these days.”

“What? Me?” Yuri almost fell out of his chair. “I mean… I’ve never really thought about it…”

Chloe laughed. “I get that. For what it’s worth, you and Victor look like you would make excellent parents. He babies that dog of his enough…”
Yuri’s brain shut down then as Chloe rambled on. Literally shut down. He couldn’t even think about the implications of her words because he couldn’t think. He was pretty sure if someone had asked him to provide his own name in that very moment he only would have been capable of staring at them blankly. He wasn’t even able to properly panic, which was nice, but entirely not the point.

He popped back into the present when Chloe snapped her fingers right in front of his eyes.

“Hey. You’re back.” Chloe looked concerned and Yuri frowned and pulled the water bottle from behind his neck, dropping it onto the ground and balling his hand into fists before placing them on his knees. “Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere…” It was the truth in a way. Yuri had literally and mentally gone absolutely nowhere. “I’m sorry. I must have gotten overheated or something.”

Chloe looked very much like she didn’t believe him, but she didn’t press. Which was a good thing because all of the thoughts that had flown out of Yuri’s brain a moment ago had come charging back and they had brought friends.

Yuri was suddenly reminded of the contract he’d signed sitting at the small kitchen table in his parent’s house. He remembered reading through it, trying to focus on exactly what it said. Admittedly, that day was still a bit of a blur, but Yuri remembered that one page, the page that had caused him to pause. He’d laughed back then, shaking his head and mumbling something about not needing to worry about that since there was no way in hell he was going to get that far.

No way in hell he would ever end up in a situation where he would be married to Victor and that particular page would have any amount of meaning to him.

No way in hell that a clause about agreeing to raise at least one child with Victor was going to ever apply to him.

Except…

Except it might.

Except, now he knew Victor. Liked him. Maybe even more than liked him. Now he was living in a universe where he could touch Victor and kiss him and hold him whenever the opportunity presented
itself.

Now he was in a universe where that one page actually did matter.

And Yuri had no idea how he was going to handle that.

~

Yuri went through the rest of the morning in a daze. Luckily, he had always been considered fairly quiet, so he was left alone for the most part so long as he acted like he was paying attention and contributed to the conversation every now and again. On the periphery of what was going on around him, he was aware that Victor had come back from wherever he had been before and had made his way to the terrace where he was holding a conversation with Michele and Emil and their families.

The children were still out on the lawn, but someone had brought out stacks of blankets and had spread them around and they were sitting crossed legged and messy as they ate from plates of food they’d been given. Yuri tried desperately to ignore them, but he couldn’t help it. Every time he wanted to steal a look at Victor, he had to look past the lawn first and they were right there in his eyesight whether he wanted them to be or not.

Phichit and he had gone back to the table they’d been at before, this time with Chloe in tow as well, the princess babbling happily about whatever topic came to her mind from the weather to the ball that night and everything in between. Yurio had followed them as well, holding himself on the fringes of the conversation as usual, barely speaking and mostly scowling, but Yuri figured it was an improvement from hiding. Yuri just continued to pick at his salad, trying to act normal.

Mari noticed. Of course, she did. Mari noticed everything, but she didn’t say anything either. Just gave him a look and turned to Chloe, answering a question the princess had asked about her paintings without skipping a beat.

He was sure she was going to try to confront him about his strange mood sooner or later, but Yuri liked his odds of being able to avoid her.

And then, just as he had finished his salad and was debating on getting up under the guise of figuring out where he should drop off his plate even though he knew full well that someone would come around to get it within the next few minutes, he noticed Victor wasn’t on the terrace any longer.
Before Yuri could look for him, the man in question was sinking into the empty seat at his side, cheerfully greeting everyone present. Despite the buzzing in the back of Yuri’s mind, he felt his mood raise automatically, the way it often did when Victor was around these days. Without even having to think about it, a soft smile crept across his face and Victor returned it in kind.

“Sorry it took me so long to find you again.” Victor ran a hand through his bangs, pushing them up off his forehead for a moment only for them to flop back down over his eye. “Are you all enjoying the day?”

“We are. Thank you so much for inviting us into your home.” Hiroko was beaming and Yuri felt his stomach do a strange flip flop to see her looking at Victor like that. With that smile she would use on her children when she was proud of them. “And thank you for taking care of our Yuri.”

“Mom!” Yuri shouted even as Victor laughed next to him.

“It’s actually quite the opposite, Mrs. Katsuki. More often than not I find that it’s Yuri who is taking care of me.” Victor was looking at Yuri’s mother, but under the table he grabbed Yuri’s hand.

“It’s true.” Phichit, the complete and utter traitor, jumped in before Yuri could even open his mouth to dispute that statement. “The other day Victor left a dossier of important papers at the breakfast table and no one noticed but Yuri.”

“I have to admit, I have a terrible habit of leaving things places. Usually one of my attendants have to follow me around and pick up everything I leave behind, but lately they’ve had more time to do their actual jobs.” Victor nudged Yuri in the shoulder with his upper arm. “I’d lose my own head if it weren’t firmly attached.”

“You are a forgetful idiot.” Yurio grumbled, apparently more willing to engage in the conversation when it was his brother they were making fun of. “You wouldn’t last five days in the real world.”

“You might be right.” If Victor was offended by Yurio’s declaration, he didn’t show it. “Now… I do believe someone mentioned there might be pictures?”

“Everyone else’s families went out of their way to make them look good in front of Victor. How
could you have let Mom bring her entire collection of baby pictures of me with her?” Yuri was lying
flat on his back in his bed while Mari meandered around his room, running her fingertips over his
furniture, looking at the titles of the books on his shelves, and even poking her head into his closet.
“If I didn’t know better I would think you were trying to sabotage me.”

“I don’t think even the apocalypse could sabotage you where that man is concerned.” Mari chuckled
drilly as she continued her investigation by moving towards the open door leading to his bathroom.
“Besides, he loved the pictures. Especially the one of you in your little leotard at your first recital. I
think I heard him trying to convince Mom to send him a copy. I’ll bet he’ll have it framed.”

“Oh god…” Yuri rolled over onto his stomach and buried his head under his pillow. The worst part
was that he was pretty sure his sister wasn’t wrong. Victor had been particularly fond of that one. To
the point where he’d gushed over it for a solid five minutes and made sure every single person at the
table saw it. Twice.

That had been the moment when Yuri had a serious internal debate about whether or not the rules of
decorum that had been pounded into his head would allow for him to slip under the table and curl up
until he died from embarrassment.

“So this is where the magic happens, huh?” Yuri could hear Mari’s steps as she made another
revolution, but he didn’t come out from under the pillow. “Where they take my nerdy, little brother
and turn him into that suave gentleman we see on TV?”

“Sometimes.” Yuri sighed, scooting away from the head of the bed and sitting up. “It’s just an act.
You know that. My glasses glare with the lights and the cameras and for some reason they think I
look better with my hair back. It… It’s like getting ready for my performances… Only now I’m
wearing suits and ties instead of dance belts and leotards.”

“And your dance partner is considerably more handsome.” Mari’s eye sparkled and she plopped
down onto the foot of the bed. “Someone is going to turn up soon to make sure you’re ready for the
ball and to herd me back downstairs to where they want me to get ready for the ball… Can you
believe it? They even have a dress ready, make-up artists, hair dressers… The triplets are eating it up.
I suspect we’ll have to drag them home kicking and screaming on Monday.”

“I have a friend here with several cameras. I’m going to have him take a million pictures of you in
revenge.” Yuri grinned as Mari’s mouth fell open in shock. “To think. My older sister,
the consummate tomboy, in a dress with her hair curled…”

“Okay, okay. You win.” Mari grabbed the soft throw that was folded at the foot of Yuri’s bed and
tossed it at him. Yuri threw a pillow back in retaliation. After a brief moment of laughter, they both settled down again and Mari looked at him, her expression serious. “It’s not always like this, is it? It’s not always putting on a show, right?”

Yuri took a deep breath and shook his head. “No. Not always. Unless we’re required to be in front of the cameras I’m allowed to look like myself. Better dressed, of course, but with messy hair and glasses and all that. We get free time, too. There’s a dance studio here. One of the first things Victor did was to make sure I would have access to it whenever I wanted. I’m… Mari, I think I’m happy here.”

“You think?” Mari raised an eyebrow and shook her own head. “You don’t know?”

“It’s confusing. Sometimes I know. Sometimes I don’t.” Yuri bit his bottom lip and chewed on it for a minute while Mari waited patiently for him to gather his thoughts into something coherent. “For the most part I’m happy, but then someone will say something or do something and I’m reminded of what is going to be expected of me if I stay here. All the choices that are going to be made for me… And I won’t have a way out. It’s… It’s not that I’m not used to people telling me what to do. Shit, at the ballet they set curfews, watched our diets, scheduled every waking moment of our days, but I always knew I could quit whenever I wanted.”

“No, you couldn’t. You might have thought that to make yourself feel better, but we both know quitting was never an option. Not when you loved to dance so much.” As much as he hated to admit it, Yuri knew his sister was right. His own stubborn determination and drive never would have allowed him to quit, no matter what he told himself to the contrary. “Yuri, I see the way you look at him. It’s so much more obvious in person. The last time any of us saw that look in your eyes was the day you received your acceptance letter and contract for the National Ballet. I don’t think you’re going to quit this, and I think you know it, too.”

There wasn’t anything else Yuri could say to that. She wasn’t wrong.

But she wasn’t entirely right either.

“It’s complicated.” Yuri let out a shaky huff of air and his hand shook as he ran it through the gelled strands of his hair. “That’s such a catch-all excuse. ‘It’s complicated’… But it is. I can’t explain it, Mari. I can’t explain it, but it is.”

“I understand.” This time when Mari reached out to ruffle his hair, Yuri didn’t try to duck away or grimace. “You’ll sort it out. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders when you aren’t in one of your funks. Use it. When your head is clear, do your thinking then and remember it. Just know that
whatever it is you do decide, we’re going to be here for you. We’re always going to be here for you.”

“I know. Thank you.” He offered up a shaky smile.

“No worries. That’s what family is for, little brother.”

~

The wait to even be allowed to leave his room felt interminable that evening. Especially since Yuri knew that there was a steady stream of guests making their way into the palace and being shown into the ballroom even as he paced back and forth from his door to his window.

All of the illusive national advisors Yuri had yet to properly meet and their families. Representatives from all of Illéa’s districts and territories and their families. Maybe even a few celebrities if JJ’s endless well of gossip was to be believed.

Yuri was going to be stuck in a room with more people than he’d ever been near in his entire life and every single one of them were important in their own way.

“Get a grip. You’ve performed in front of crowds this size before.” Yuri grumbled to himself as he clasped his hands behind his back in order to prevent himself from giving into temptation and running his fingers through where Minako had recently fixed his hair for the second time that day. “Granted, I never had to interact with crowds this size before…”

Yuri shook his head. The longer he was trapped in his room, the worse he was going to get, but he’d already tried leaving once, simply to pace in the hallway where there was more space and he’d been chased back inside by a tired looking guard.

They were certainly taking the whole ‘Grand Entry’ thing seriously.

At least he knew his mother would be waiting for him to be his escort into the ball. Apparently, it was a major faux pas to show up to an event of this caliber without some kind of escort and since no one had figured out how to clone Victor so they could all have him, they had been allowed to choose from their assorted family members.
Before he could pace enough to work up a sweat, Minako was back in order to lead him downstairs.

There was a small holding room off to the side of the ballroom and they were ushered inside quickly and with little ceremony. Yuri craned his neck and was able to catch a glimpse of warm, golden light spilled out of the ballroom and heard the loud buzz of multiple conversations over the strains of string instruments.

“Mom.” Yuri let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding when he saw his mother waiting for him, chatting happily with Phichit’s mother and Chris’ father. It was strange to see her in a floor length emerald colored gown with her hair curled and her nails painted, but underneath it all, she held herself with the same calm confidence he was used to. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you. It seems like a bit much though…” Hiroko reached up and brushed some imaginary lint off the shoulders of his tailored and pressed tux as her eyes gleamed with pride behind her round lenses. “Oh, Yuri… You look so handsome. That prince of yours isn’t going to be able to take his eyes off you.”

“That’s the plan.” Phichit cackled as he bounced over and gave his own mother a firm hug. “They make us look so pretty, but it’s Yuri that always ends up the center of attention in the end.”

Yuri was about to reflexively protest Phichit’s statement when Mila shouted for their attention from across the room where the princes and princesses had just arrived.

“Okay! There’s no particular order other than the film crews wanting Victor to come in last right before the kings and queens so if you could all just line up somehow…” Mila sighed as JJ pushed past her immediately, his mother on his arm and in full charm mode. “Alright, everyone after JJ then.”

They moved towards the door in a group, Yuri pausing in order to let Phichit pass right before Mari elbowed her way in with the triplets crowded around her skirts.

“Mom. Yuri. There you are.” Mari looked tired, some of her hair starting to fall from where it was pinned at the top of her head. “Sorry to bother you, but the triplets were starting to get restless. Are they about to let you guys come in now?”

Yuri pointed down the hall where they could hear an announcer calling JJ and his mother’s name. “Yeah. They just started.”
“Oh… Shit.” Mari shifted awkwardly in her heels. “Come on, girls. You don’t want to miss Yuri’s big entrance, do you?”

“Look, Alex, I love you. I really do, but I am not walking into another ball with my brother as my escort.” Chloe’s voice cut through Mari’s attempts to wrangle the complaining triplets back the way they came.

“Then who are you going to walk in with?” Alex asked with a huff and Yuri couldn't help but look over at the pair. Yuri had said maybe two words to the Crown Prince of Britannia, the other man choosing to stick more to himself than speak to anyone else. “You can't walk in alone. Mother will have a fit.”

“I won’t walk in alone. I’ll walk with…” Chloe’s green eyes scanned the slowly moving mass of bodies, latching onto where Yuri’s family was causing a bit of a bottle neck in the doorway. “Mari! You don’t have an escort. I can be yours!”

“Wha-?” Mari looked stunned and the triplets took advantage of her distraction and pushed their way past her in order to hide behind Yuri’s legs. “I’m not supposed to have an escort…”

“Nonsense. You heard my brother. No one is supposed to walk in alone.” Chloe skipped forward, linking her arm through Yuri’s older sister’s and pulling her away before anyone else could say another word.

“What just happened?” Yuri muttered to himself, looking past Crown Prince Alex and at Victor who didn’t seem to have an answer either as he merely shrugged. He felt a tug on his pant leg and looked down. “Okay… I guess you three can come with us?”

“Wait. If Chloe gets to pick an escort, I want to pick my own, too.” Yurio shoved Yuri out of the way and motioned for the triplets to go with him. “It’ll be better than whoever I’m supposed to be assigned to.”

To their credit, Axel, Lutz, and Loop went quietly enough, transferring themselves from Yuri’s pants to the young prince’s.

“Mom…”
“Oh, let them have some fun.” His mother was apparently not concerned at all and she waved off Yuri’s mild panic. “It’ll be fine.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but you have to go now, Yuri.” Mila placed a gentle hand on Yuri’s elbow and guided them out of the room. “Don’t worry about your sisters. We’ll keep an eye on them.”

Yuri nodded, still not entirely sure what had just happened.

Then there wasn’t any more time to think about what had just happened as they were announcing his name and his mother’s name and all eyes in the room were on them as they stepped through the massive double doors arm in arm.

Taking a deep breath, Yuri nodded as they passed various groups of people. They made their way across the room slowly, Yuri having to match his stride to his mother’s shorter legs. This part was a lot easier than he’d though it would be. All he had to do was focus on his posture, on making each step smooth and even, following a made up beat in his head.

They made it over to where his father, Mari, the triplets, Chloe, and Yurio were waiting, only turning back to face the entrance once they’d made it safely in their bubble.

All in all, it had taken about two minutes from the introductions to get where they were now and Yuri forced himself to continue to breathe. It hadn’t been too bad. Now they were going to announce Victor, then the respective reigning monarchs and then the ball would be officially opened and the dancing could begin.

He could do this.

He would do this.

~

Yuri was actually doing a lot better than he’d thought he would. For the most part, people left him alone and he spent more time talking with Chris, Phichit, and their families than anyone else. Chris’ father knew a lot of the people present, him being involved in politics back in their home district, and
it was interesting to get a fresh take on certain topics.

As the night wore on, Yuri was pulled away onto the dance floor more than once, though Victor seemed to always have a partner whenever he was out there. No matter how the prince was occupied or who with, Yuri still felt his gaze drawn to him constantly and, more often than not, he found Victor’s blue eyes looking back at him no matter where they were or how many people were between them.

Dancing saved him from having to socialize too much, so he took every offer put forth to him. He danced with Mari and with each one of the triplets in turn. He took a turn with his mother and with Phichit and Chris. Then Chloe cut in and they danced through two songs, the princess giggling and allowing him to sweep her around, gracefully falling into step with him with ease and keeping up a light conversation the whole time.

There were two strangers he danced with then. One was a representative from Kent and the other was the wife of one of the financial advisors that sat on the advisory council to the king. They were both polite and gracious partners and he made sure to keep his skill level in line with their abilities.

Once those dances were done, he moved back to his quiet corner, sipping from a glass of water a servant provided him as he caught his breath.

Victor was dancing with Phichit then. Yuri had lost track of exactly who Victor’s partners had been. He was pretty sure he’d already danced with most, if not all, of the other Elite and a part of Yuri thrummed in anticipation. It would be his turn soon.

He was tired. He could feel the strange buzz that would build under his skin from prolonged contact with strangers, but he pushed it down. Even if he would have been allowed to leave without taking his turn with Victor, which he knew he wouldn’t be, he didn’t want to. It was starting to be the only thing he could think about.

Which was better than the other thoughts that had kept trying to inject their way into his mind throughout the evening. Thoughts that were best to be kept at bay until he had several uninterrupted hours ahead of him in order to have a proper freak out about them without risking inconveniencing anyone.

“Nervous?” Chris asked as he sidled up next to Yuri’s little haven beside on of the thick columns that ringed the edges of the room. “You’re the last one left. He’ll be coming to ask you to take a turn around the dance floor soon.”
“No more or less nervous than I ever am.” Yuri stated plainly. It was the truth, in a fashion. The only nerves he felt were familiar ones. The ones he would get before a performance. Making small talk with strangers, having to speak live on national television… Those were the things that made his stomach twist in knots. Dancing, even if it was with Victor in front of strangers and friends and family and for the ten cameras that were scattered throughout the event… That was something he could do. Tonight would play to his strengths for once.

“Would you like to spend another song with me? As a warm up for the main event?” Chris’ tone was friendly and Yuri found himself agreeing. He’d had enough of a break. He needed to get moving again before his traitorous anxiety found something to latch onto.

Chris was a good dancer. He led firmly, but with grace and precision. It was easy to stretch out into his longer stride and he let Chris dictate the pace and the spins, Yuri happy for the moment to go along for the ride.

The song reached its final crescendo and Yuri was spun away from Chris, twirling in the center of the floor before reaching out, expecting Chris to be there to sweep him back into the music of the new song, but it wasn’t Chris’ arms he fell into.

It was Victor’s.

“Ah, finally.” Victor sighed in his typical dramatic fashion as he pulled Yuri flush against his chest. “I’ve been waiting for my chance with you all evening. Although, I have to admit I was purposefully saving the best for last.”

“I figured that might be the case.” Yuri had actually figured no such thing, but Victor seemed to like it when Yuri would tease him, and that had been too good of an opportunity to pass up.

“Yuri…” Victor moved them and Yuri allowed himself to be led again. “I’ve been waiting to dance with you for months now. Ever since you told me about Lilia giving all of you lessons.”

“Then let’s dance.”

The music was fast paced for this song and Yuri fell into step with Victor like they had been doing it their entire lives. It felt so natural. Yuri didn’t have to adjust his step or count the beat in order to stay on time. Victor’s right hand was a solid weight on Yuri’s waist and his left was entwined with
Yuri’s. Their bodies were pressed close together, only the barest hint of space between them, the bare minimum to make sure their legs didn’t tangle up together and get in each other’s way.

People were starting to look and Yuri knew there had been cameras trained on them from the moment Yuri had ended up in the prince’s arms, but, for once, he was hard pressed to care. So what if they were watching? He’d been wanting to do this for far longer than just a few months and he was going to enjoy every second. Let them look. This was, after all, where he excelled.

They spun and dipped and every time they parted and came back together a shiver ran up Yuri’s spine just under where Victor’s palm had gone to play against the small of his back. Victor grinned down at him and Yuri quirked an eyebrow in a silent challenge, something he wasn’t used to feeling itching under the surface of his skin, different from the buzzing from before and oh, so addictive.

Victor leant forward, their movements slowing for a moment. Yuri’s fingers dug in deeper on Victor’s upper arm and he bit his lip as Victor’s deep voice whispered into his ear.

“Do you want to lead?”

Yuri pulled back so that he could see Victor’s face. There was a rosy flush across Victor’s pale cheeks and the bridge of his nose and his eyes were wide, breaths puffing out unevenly through his parted lips. He felt his own lips curl up in a confident smirk.

“Think you can keep up?”

Victor didn’t respond verbally, only fluidly switched their hands around, taking a half step back and allowing Yuri to push forward.

Yuri didn’t hold back then. Couldn’t even if he had wanted to. They could have been dancing for minutes or hours or even days for all he knew or cared. They were completely in sync, looking only at each other as one song bled into the next and they shifted back and forth between who was leading and who was following.

He didn’t count the songs, but he knew it had been more than one. His legs were starting to burn pleasantly with exertion and he could feel a bead of sweat roll down his back under the starched material of his shirt, but they still didn’t stop. He was dizzy from prolonged close contact with Victor, his head going fuzzy like he’d consumed an entire bottle of champagne even though all he’d had that evening was water.
And then Yuri dipped Victor one more time, keeping his eyes locked on where Victor was looking back up at him.

Victor looked soft and open, his blue eyes sparkling and his face flushed. His silver bangs slid back away from his face and his smile was so genuine it made Yuri’s heart ache even as one solid though crossed his mind for the first time since they had begun their dance.

*I’m in love with this man*...
Whew. It's been a pretty packed weekend for me! Happy (belated) Fourth of July to all my American friends and thanks to everyone who left a comment on the last chapter! I'm going to start answering all the comments from the previous chapter tonight as I'm squeezing out some break time at work to get this chapter up. ^_^

Up next: The families go home! Victor and Yuri have another Serious Conversation. And we finally find out what happened with Yuko, Takeshi, and the triplets!!

Enjoy!

Chapter 18 – Secrets

Yuri had spent most of his Sunday in a tired haze.

He supposed it was to be expected. The day had been long and the night even longer and Yuri had spent about an hour or so tossing and turning before being able to fall asleep despite the bone deep weariness that had come from being on his feet until two in the morning when the last of the guests had finally left. It was normal for him to feel drained when he had to spend extended periods of time with large groups of people and the day before had been nothing but that.

And then there was the moment of intense clarity he’d had when he had been dancing in Victor’s arms.

He wasn’t exactly sure what he was going to do about that yet, but he wasn’t sure he had the mental fortitude to think about it right then. Instead, he allowed his family’s warmth and support to wash over him throughout the day, soaking it in and allowing it to bolster him.

Sunday was easy, despite the haziness. Victor wasn’t there, which helped. The royals had gone into town for an engagement at the parliamentary building where the district representatives met in order to draft the petitions that would eventually end up on the king’s desk sooner or later. Yuri wasn’t sure what he would have done if he had turned a corner and found Victor standing there. Probably something embarrassing.

So, Sunday was easy. Monday was less so.
For the first time since he had arrived, Yuri had woken up before Minako came bursting into his room. To be honest, he hadn’t slept all that well to begin with, a combination of all the thoughts he kept pushing to the back of his mind to deal with later and the knowledge that he was going to watch his family go home without him and without knowing when he was going to be able to see them or speak to them through anything other than letters again keeping him wired and restless.

By the time Minako arrived with a tray of breakfast, Yuri was already dressed and in front of the mirror in his bathroom preparing to put his contacts in. He didn’t need anyone to warn him that there would be cameras at the airport to catch their goodbyes.

If Minako thought it was odd for him to be up without her having to literally pry him from the warm embrace of his bed, she didn’t mention it. Instead, she sat him down and worked on his hair while he nibbled at the fruit and oatmeal she’d brought for him. Ever adept at reading his moods, she kept up a constant stream of chatter as she worked and never once paused or asked him a question. Her words had a calming effect on him and he was feeling a bit better by the time he was done eating and he was ready to make his way downstairs to where there were several cars waiting to take them to the airport.

His mood plummeted again when he saw a suitcase and two duffle bags waiting in the foyer.

The only two people in the foyer were Emil and Michele, both of them engaged in quiet conversation over the top of the pile of luggage. Yuri hesitated for a moment on the stairway, a spark of curiosity warring with concern that he was walking into something that wasn’t his business and shouldn’t be interrupted.

Michele muttered something and then nodded his head towards where Yuri was standing, causing Emil to look up and over at him.

“Good morning, Yuri!” Emil waved happily and Yuri took a deep breath and continued down the rest of the steps. “Did you sleep well?”

“Oh… Um, yeah. I slept fine.” Yuri scratched at the back of his neck and shifted his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. “You?”

“Slept like a baby. Too many long days and late nights in a row.” Emil grinned, but it did little to dispel the odd tension that had settled over them. “So… Um…”
“I’m going home.” Michele’s gruff tone cut Emil off before he could say anything further. The man rolled his eyes as both Yuri and Emil’s shocked faces. “What? There’s no point hiding it. I’m going back home with my family today.”

“Mickey… You can just talk to Victor. I’m sure he…” Michele held up a hand and Emil trailed off again.

“What I was about to tell you a minute ago was that I’ve already talked to Victor.” Michele huffed out a breath of air. “It was my choice. He didn’t approach me. I asked for it on my own. I’m… I’m done here. I’m ready to go home.”

Emil crossed his arms over his chest, but kept up a neutral expression. Yuri didn’t know what to say or do. He felt like he had walked into the middle of something, but there wasn’t exactly a way to politely back out now.

Apparently aware of their unease, Michele frowned and sighed heavily.

“Look, it’s not that I don’t like you guys or hate being here… It’s just… I was here to prove to my sister that I was capable of doing something without her, and I’ve done that.” Michele kicked out at the bags at his feet, gently nudging one of them with the toe of his shoe. “I like Victor well enough, but I don’t want to waste his time on me any longer. He didn’t do anything wrong and I didn’t do anything wrong. It’s… It’s time that I leave. For me. Because it’s what I want.”

“I came here to prove something I didn’t need to prove instead of doing what I wanted. Now I know what I want and I’m not going to stand around here any longer.”

There was a long, drawn out silence that followed Michele’s declaration. Emil looked like he didn’t know what to say and Yuri was in the same boat.

“We’re going to miss you.” Yuri wasn’t sure if that was the right or wrong thing to say in that moment, but it was the truth. He might not have spent a lot of personal time with Michele, but there was something comforting about his constant presence. Even though he mostly kept to himself, he still always had a good word to say to everyone, even if that word was often given in the grumpiest of fashions.

“We are.” Emil agreed eagerly, his ever present smile slipping for the first time since Yuri had met
him. “But you have to do what you have to do, right?”

“Right.” Michele squared his shoulders and stood up straight. “I expect to receive letters from all of you. I don’t trust whatever the media is going to say, so you need to make sure that I get the full story, okay?”

“Of course. We wouldn’t leave you in the dark like that, man.” Emil ran a hand through his hair and let out a strangled sounding laugh. “We’re still your friends.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks.” Michele cracked a weak smile then before turning towards the stairs where there was the sound of at least two more people talking as they made their own way down to start the day. “Well, this was bound to happen sooner or later anyways. At least this way I can leave on my own terms.”

Before either Yuri or Emil could come with a response for that, Leo and Guang Hong had reached the midway point on the stairs and were now looking back and forth between the three men in the foyer and the pile of bags in front of them.

After that, there wasn’t much opportunity to really talk as the foyer was quickly crowded by the rest of the Elite and their own questions. By the time they were being loaded into the cars, Michele had been commandeered by Emil, Seung-Gil, and Georgi and Yuri didn’t have another chance to speak to him, though he wasn’t entirely sure what he could have said even if he had.

No matter what, after today they would be going from ten to nine.

The end was getting closer and closer and, while he had a better understanding of his own emotions, Yuri still didn’t know what he wanted to do.

He was running out of time.

~

They were ushered into the terminal they had arrived at all those months ago as soon as they reached the airport. This time the only cameras were the same crew that followed them around at the palace and the crowds of onlookers were nowhere to be seen. Yuri was glad for it, too. He only hoped the cameras that were with them gave them some time to say proper goodbyes without being filmed.
It seemed as though he wasn’t the only one, as more than a few of the men let out a sigh of relief as Mila requested them to remain on the other side of a glass wall that separated the baggage claim area from the main terminal with instructions that she would be back for them when it was time for each family to board and not a second sooner.

There were two gates that had been cordoned off for their use and their families were spread through the massive area, some sitting in the plastic seats with bags at their feet and others milling about ducking in and out of the few shops that were open in their roped off section. Yuri spotted his family by the window that looked out of the building and towards the runway where there were a few planes taxiing around.

As soon as he reached them, the triplets leapt up and hugged him one by one, all three of them chattering away so fast it was hard for Yuri to decipher any individual words.

“Girls, girls.” Hiroko sighed as she placed a gentle hand on Lutz and Loop’s shoulders while Mari delicately extricated Axel from around Yuri’s ankles. “Calm down. We still have about an hour with him. There’s no need for all that just yet.”

“But Mom…” Axel had slumped down in the chair Mari had deposited her into. “We aren’t going to get to see him again until December! That’s too far away.”

“You’ve gone five years without seeing him before. Three and a half months won’t be that bad.” Mari stated as she grabbed Loop and plopped her down right next to her sister. Lutz, to her credit, realized she was going to be next and took her own seat quietly enough. “There. Save the dramatics for the cameras, okay?”

“You’re coming back in December?” Yuri asked hesitantly. As far as he knew, no one had said anything about their families being scheduled to come back for any occasion. But, then again, they had been more or less kept in the dark about most things until the absolute last possible moment, so it was entirely possible that a return visit had been planned and they hadn’t been told about it. Although, in that situation, it was hard to imagine they would have told Yuri’s family anything either.

“The next time you complain that no one tells you girls anything, Axel, I want you to remember this moment and you’ll have the answer as to why.” Mari shook her head slowly at where the young girl in question was now fidgeting in her seat and looking down at the floor before turning back to Yuri. “She’s referring to the Christmas Ball. I think Prince Victor thought they were asleep when he mentioned it to us the other day, they were pretty tired after the ball… Anyways, he may have mentioned that they would want the families of whoever was left to come back for the Christmas Ball…”
Mari trailed off then. Not that Yuri needed the rest of her sentence to understand the implication. Victor anticipated Yuri would still be around at Christmas.

Not that it wasn’t something Yuri didn’t already know. The more he had come to know Victor, the more he understood that the man wore his heart on his sleeve more often than most people seemed to realize. Victor had always spoken candidly about what he hoped Yuri would be to him. It was Yuri who was dragging his heels and waffling over making the final decision, not the prince.

It was different, somehow, to know that Victor had talked to his family about seeing them again in the future, though. Somehow slightly off from how Yuri was used to thinking about it. Almost like Victor had faith that Yuri wasn’t going to leave him, that no matter how often he leapt back and forth between wanting to accept the proposal to convincing himself that he would only be doing the entire country a disservice if he did anything other than refuse, Yuri would eventually choose to stay.

If only Yuri had that same amount of faith in himself.

“Maybe we should talk about this later.” Yuri didn’t want to come off as dismissive and he inclined his head towards a bank of chairs off to his left where Guang Hong was talking softly with his mother, father, and younger sister. Mari nodded, clearly taking the hint. “Whatever happens, it was good to see all of you again. I really did miss you. All of you.”

The triplets perked up a bit at that, babbling happily to each other before Lutz caught sight of the little dark haired girl that was the daughter of one of Georgi’s older brothers waving at them from in front of the entrance to one of the little shops along the edge of the terminal. Hiroko caught where their attention was now aimed and let out a soft sigh.

“Come on, girls. Let’s go say goodbye to your friend and see if there are any snacks that might look good for the flight.” Hiroko and Mari herded the girls in the right direction at that, leaving Yuri alone with his father for the first time since everyone had arrived a few days prior.

They didn’t say anything at first, the silence stretching comfortably between them. Despite exchanging letters frequently for the all times Yuri had been away, he often found that they didn’t have much to say to each other when they were face to face. They had always lived in different worlds and, while Yuri knew his father supported him implicitly and would have done anything to make sure Yuri had whatever he needed and wanted to be happy in his life, he also knew there was a disconnect between their worlds that they had never quite been able to bridge. It was fine. Toshiya didn’t have to understand what Yuri did for Yuri to feel his own brand of love and support, but it did make for some quiet evenings when they had been the only two hanging around the house.
“I like him. The prince.” Yuri’s father was the first to break the silence and Yuri started a bit in his seat at the words.

“Oh… Yeah. I… Uh… I like him, too.” Yuri frowned as his father laughed.

“I should hope so.” Suddenly realizing what he’d said, Yuri felt his face heat even as his father continued to chuckle happily at his side. “He’s different than they make him out to be in the papers and on television, isn’t he?”

Yuri shrugged and nodded. “Yes. I mean, of course he is.”

“Hmmm. Of course.” There was a sparkle in his father’s eyes that Yuri recognized. It was the look he would get when he found a new story to write. “He will be a good king someday. You can tell. In the things he says, the things he doesn’t say. I like him.”

“He will be.” Of that Yuri didn’t have any doubts at all. Victor wasn’t what he had been expecting at all when they’d met, but that was almost a good thing. The media always played him off as aloof and untouchable, but Victor was the opposite of that. He cared and he cared deeply. Perhaps almost too deeply at times, though Yuri couldn’t think of that as a bad thing even though he knew others probably would. “I wouldn’t still be here if he wouldn’t.”

“I know.” Toshiya reached out then and pat Yuri’s hand once before pulling back again. “I think we all forget sometimes that there is more to a person than just the one thing that defines them to the outside world.”

Before Yuri could think of a response to that, if there even was a response to that, the triplets were back with his mother and Mari in tow. Their arms were filled with treats and they quickly dumped some of them in Yuri’s lap, laughing and pointing out the different kinds of candy, thrilled about getting to take back certain brands they couldn’t get back home and extracting promises from him that he would send them more whenever he could to ensure they didn’t run out.

He tried desperately to enjoy the small amount of time he had left with all of them, but his father’s words still echoed through his head.

It wasn’t like he didn’t know that there was a part of Victor that wasn’t taken up by the crown he was to someday wear. It was just that it was hard sometimes for him to separate the two people.
Sometimes it was hard to reconcile the adorable dork rolling around in the grass with his dog with the person who would sit still and regal in the highbacked chair with studio lights shining down on him.

Sometimes it was still hard to hold Victor apart from his crown and all the things that crown represented.

Until he could do that he was always going to be walking this thin wire between what he wanted and what he thought he deserved. Doomed to never really be able to fall one way or the other.

As he hugged his family goodbye before they went down the ramp with some of the others to return home, he felt a tug in his heart pulling him after them. Suddenly, it wasn’t so hard to understand why Michele had made the choice he’d made. It felt like a part of Yuri was walking down that covered ramp, hauling him along with them.

But there was an equally heavy weight pulling him back the other way. Back towards Victor and whatever had been building between them. Yuri might have a word for it now, but one word never had been enough to encompass an emotion in Yuri’s experience.

It was that feeling that won out in the end.

The doors closed on the backs of his family and Yuri moved to the window to watch as the plane rolled away after several long moments.

However this ended up… Whatever he would choose in the end, he had made a choice now.

He was going back to the palace.

~

The mood was much more solemn on their way back. No one said much in the cars, choosing instead to look out the windows as the scenery passed them by in silence. Even Phichit and Chris, usually up for injecting some levity into the foulest of moods, were subdued and less quick to fill the quiet.
Even the palace seemed more somber even with the bright, summer sun shining on it when they arrived back. The halls felt emptier, even though the same amount of servants and advisors were wandering through them on their way to and from business. Even the gardens looked bleak, empty as they were of the tents and bodies that had filled them for the past two days.

Normally Yuri would have embraced the peace and quiet after the flurry of the past few days, but something still felt off.

He knew what it was, if he cared enough to scratch just beneath the surface of the harmless thoughts he had layered over the tumultuous rumbling of everything he was trying to ignore. Now that there were no more distractions and they had the promise of a long afternoon alone, it was significantly more difficult to keep them at bay.

As he often did when he was too restless to sit still, he found himself in the dance studio within half an hour of being back at the palace.

Stretching helped to clear his head as he focused on priming his body to move with the fluidity and grace that he often lacked in all other aspects of his life. He could feel frustration brewing in the stiffness of his joints. His right knee ached from overwork. Running around like he was ten years old again and then spending a long evening dancing had done his weaker tendons no favors, though he couldn’t find it within himself to regret a second of it.

Even if it had meant he’d spent most of Sunday evening digging out his old heating pad and alternating ice and heat in an effort to get the swelling to go down.

Even before he’d consciously decided on this course of action, he’d known it wasn’t going to be enough, but he was desperate for something to take the edge off before he ended up falling apart and Victor was in meetings with the Britannians until after dinner as they discussed possible revisions to some of the provision of the long standing treaty between their nations. Yuri couldn’t pull him from his duties just because he was feeling a little shaky.

Not that he would have known what to say to Victor even if he could have.

And that was the problem in a nutshell, wasn’t it?

He had a million things he wanted to talk to Victor about. Needed to talk to him about, and absolutely no idea how to start the conversation.
What he did know was that he couldn’t come to Victor as a blubbering mess, or strung so tightly that it would take only the smallest of motions to force him to snap. He didn’t know when Victor was going to be free again. It could be in a few hours, a few days, or even a few weeks, but he did know he needed to be ready when that time did come.

Fully stretched, he flipped through his music player. It was the one expense he had decided he couldn’t do without and, even though it was old and sorely in need of an update, it had been with him since long before he’d left home for the first time and there was a sort of comfort in having the music he’d collected over such a long period of time with him. He never had deleted a single song.

As much as he wanted to work on the solo piece he’d been refining, he knew it wasn’t a good idea. The fast pace and many twists and turns weren’t going to do his knee any favors, even though dancing until his bones ached and his lungs burned was exactly what he wanted to do right then.

At first nothing caught his attention. He didn’t want to tread old ground by pulling from the repertoire of roles and pieces he’d performed before. Moving through steps he could do in his sleep wasn’t going to keep his anxious thoughts at bay.

Then he paused in his scrolling, a song catching his eye. It wasn’t something he, or anyone he knew of, had danced to before. It was a fluke he even had it to begin with, a friend needing a way to get the recording from the studio it was recorded in to her practice space without having to pay any fees.

Yuri plugged the device into the speaker system and the lilting strains of a piano filled the empty space causing a smile to tug at the corners of his lips for the first time that day.

Yes, that was perfect.

~

Everyone seemed to be in better spirits once dinner rolled around. For the first time since their families had arrived, they took their meal in the dining hall at the large round table with the reigning monarchs at their backs. It felt more like normal. Or, what was fast becoming normal, in any case.

Again Yuri was on the opposite end of the table from Victor. The disappointment Yuri continued to feel at every single meal stung each time, even when he was starting to suspect it was coming before he even entered the room.
For once he was between Chris and Phichit, though, and that did help. It was hard to stay stuck in his own head when Phichit was laughing and joking with Chris over him. Whatever odd tension had been between them before seemed to be gone now. Yuri made a mental note to bring it up with Phichit the next time they were alone.

Regardless of how or when they had gotten back on better terms, it did make for a relaxing meal and Yuri was feeling better by the time their empty plates were being collected.

From across the table, Victor caught his eye. The prince raised his eyebrows and tapped his index finger against the top of the table twice, grinning widely when Yuri picked up the folded napkin from his lap and placed it to the right of his water glass.

After dinner, he excused himself from accompanying his friends to the Entertaining Room under the excuse of wanting to have a long soak and tend to his knee again before going to bed. They let him go easily enough. He never had made a secret of wanting to have time to himself in the evenings and, as far as he knew, none of his friends were offended by it.

They might have been if they knew where he was really going, though, so he took a back route to the parlor on the second floor.

Usually when they met like this, Yuri was the first to arrive. It was almost never simple for Victor to get out of any obligations he might have in the evenings and, more often than not, he couldn’t get away at all and Yuri ended up waiting for hours at times for the prince to appear.

This time Victor had beaten him there and Yuri was pulled into a tight hug the second he cleared the threshold and the door had clicked closed behind him. He instantly felt all the residual tension he’d still be holding melt away.

“Ah, Yuri. It’s been far too long since I’ve been able to hold you like this.” Victor lifted his chin enough so that Yuri could tuck his head into the crook of his neck. Yuri felt Victor’s lips press lightly against his hair and he wrapped his arms around the prince’s waist like he’d been doing it his entire life.

“We danced for hours together just the other night.” Yuri murmured directly into Victor’s collar bones, not quite ready to pull back or leave Victor’s embrace to speak to him face to face.

“As amazing as that was, it’s not the same.” Victor’s grip on Yuri’s shoulders tightened and Yuri
made a small noise of protest as the prince pushed him back so there was some space between them. He was quieted by Victor gently placing his hands under Yuri’s chin in order to tilt his face upwards. “Besides, I couldn’t do this then, could I?”

And then Victor’s lips were on his and Yuri didn’t have any complaints about that at all.

Yuri was fairly certain he could live for one hundred years and still never get tired of kissing Victor. Never grow tired of the way their lips pressed together or the soft gasp Victor let out when Yuri would run his tongue along his bottom lip. He craved the way their bodies pressed against each other, the hand that had left his chin and had moved to sliding through his hair.

Yes, this was the part Yuri was one hundred percent sure about.

Eventually the need to breathe had them pulling apart. Yuri moved his hand from where he was still gripping the other man’s waist right above his hip and cupped Victor’s cheek, running his thumb back and forth along the prince’s cheek bone.

“Feel better?” Yuri teased, not able to stop his laughter as Victor nodded enthusiastically.

“Much better.” Victor reached up and grabbed for the hand Yuri had on his face and used it to pull them towards the couch. “Now… You’ve looked like you’ve had a lot on your mind these past few days. Do you want to talk about it?”

Of course, Victor had noticed his distraction. Victor noticed a lot more than some people gave him credit for and Yuri probably hadn’t been as subtle about hiding his unease as he thought he had been. Or maybe he had been and Victor had been paying better attention to Yuri and his mood than Yuri thought he’d been. Either way, he had been planning on talking to Victor about some of what was bothering him anyways, and now he had the perfect opening to do so.

Yuri nodded as they both sank down onto the couch, choosing to curl up on opposite ends with their knees pressed together in the center. As much as Yuri wanted to stay wrapped up in Victor’s arm, it was a lot easier to keep his thoughts coherent when he didn’t have the distraction of Victor’s warm body curled around him.

For a long minute, Yuri didn’t know what to say. He never had been able to find the right words in serious situations and he’d been bottling everything up for the past three days which was causing every single, individual thought rushing to the surface in a massive wave, bottlenecking in his throat
as he struggled to choose which one he wanted to talk about more, choking him and leaving him with nothing.

“It’s… I don’t know.” Yuri frowned, frustrated with himself for not being able to do something as simple as talk. “It’s a lot of things, I guess.”

“Was it too much? Bringing in everyone’s family right now with all that’s going on with the visiting royal family?” Victor sounded concerned and Yuri quickly shook his head.

“No!” Then he paused, fidgeted a bit, and then amended his statement. “Okay, so it was a bit much like overall, but I’m glad you invited them. I didn’t even realize how much I really missed them until they were right there in front of me, and I know all the others were just as thrilled to see their own families. You shouldn’t regret that.”

“Okay…” Victor still didn’t sound convinced, but he let out a quiet sigh and relaxed some. “It should be quieter this week. I mean, I know Mila and Celestino have some things planned to keep all of you busy and to prepare for the special edition of *The Report* on Friday, but there won’t be as much commotion…”

“Victor, it’s fine. The commotion was fine. It was nothing I couldn’t handle.” Yuri didn’t have to say that it hadn’t necessarily been easy for him, but he didn’t have to. The fact that Victor was still so concerned meant he already knew. “I just… Seeing them made me think about some things I hadn’t really considered before, that’s all. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.”

“Around what?” Victor pressed on even as Yuri continued to fidget and gnaw on his bottom lip. “You don’t have to say if you don’t want to, but I wish you would. I can’t guarantee I’m going to have the answers, but it might help to have someone to talk to about it.”

“Is Yurio really engaged to one of them?” Yuri found he had blurted out the question before his mental filter could stop him or try to phrase it in a better way. Instantly, he felt the heat of a blush spreading across his face and down his neck. “I-I mean…”

“Hmmm.” Victor made an odd humming noise deep in the back of his throat. Yuri opened his mouth to say something, probably an apology, but the prince held up a hand for him to stop, reaching out to squeeze his knee gently in reassurance as he eyes flicked back and forth between Yuri’s face and the ceiling as it was clear he was trying to find the right words to say. Finally, he frowned and sighed heavily before speaking again. “I’m not going to lie to you. It’s public record and if you asked anyone in the palace they’d tell you. Technically there is a written agreement that was drawn up at the time Yurio was born to promise him to a member of the Royal Family of Britannia once he
becomes of age.”

“Technically?” Yuri leant forward, curious to hear Victor’s response.

“Well, yes, but agreements can be amended or dissolved if the occasion calls for it.” Victor’s fingers tapped idly against Yuri’s knee. “I can’t promise that will be the case in this situation, but I can promise my father and I are not unaware of the issue… Or of Yurio’s feelings about the matter. He’s not exactly quiet about it.”

“He’s not exactly quiet about much.” Yuri stated blandly and Victor chuckled, causing some of the tension to relax. “It could still happen, though. No matter what Yurio says or what deals you try to make.”

Victor nodded. “It could still happen. They are being generous in allowing Yurio some choice. In allowing him to wait until he’s older and he’s had a chance to figure out where his preferences lie. If not one of the twins, then there are some cousins that have been offered… I know it’s not normal, but if either Father or I can’t find a way out of it without losing the support of one of our strongest allies… It could still happen.”

“It is normal, though, isn’t it?” Yuri pushed forward, too stubborn to worry about being scared at this point. “For royal children. Any royal children.”

Yuri knew as soon as the words had left his mouth that Victor understood exactly what he’d meant. There was a spark of something in his blue eyes, something that flickered too quickly for Yuri to completely understand, but it had been there none the less. For a long moment neither of them spoke, Yuri content to wait patiently and Victor seemingly frozen, his thoughts kept frustratingly locked inside his own head where Yuri couldn’t even begin to guess at what they might be.

So Yuri waited, intimately aware of how hard it was to find something to say when the question that had been asked was more emotion than question. He took his own hand and covered Victor’s with it, the heat of their combined grasp bleeding through the thick fabric of his slacks until Victor rotated his hand so they were able to entwine their fingers and press palm to palm. He didn’t want to speak, but it was another way to let Victor know he was still here. That he wasn’t going to shy away from whatever answer he eventually came up with.

That he didn’t blame Victor or condemn him regardless of what his response was or the reality of the situation.
If… If I were to have more than one child… Yes, I would…” Victor took a deep breath, squeezing Yuri’s hand so tightly both their knuckles turned white. “I wouldn’t like it, but I would have to do the same. Try to find some kind of alliance that could be made. I’m going to be honest with you, Yuri. I haven’t given it much thought. It always seemed so far away I didn’t see much of a point in worrying about it.”

“I guess I should start worrying about it, shouldn’t I?”

“You’re… You’re not the only one who’s never thought about it.” Yuri wasn’t sure if he was saying the right thing, or if there even was a right thing to say, but Victor had been honest with him and he deserved honesty right back. “Someone said something to me the other day that reminded me of what will happen if… Well, you know. Anyways. When it happened, my mind just went blank. I tried to picture it, but I couldn’t. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t see it.”

“You’ve never…? Not even once?” Victor looked surprised. Really and truly surprised. “I can’t say I’ve spent much time pondering the details or any serious decisions I might have to make, but I can say I’ve pictured it some. More often recently, naturally.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Yuri shrugged even as Victor let out a small sound of confusion. “You’ve always known it was in your future. You might not have known the how and the when and the who, but you’ve always known it was coming. Ever since I was old enough to understand… Well, the biology of it all, I’ve more or less dismissed it as an option. I’ve known for a very long time that a woman was never going to be a part of my future, so that more or less took all those types of options off the table with it. I also may have always assumed I wouldn’t exactly be particularly good at it.”

“Really?” Now Victor sounded more curious than confused. “Speaking strictly in hypotheticals… I’m fairly confident we could be good parents. We’ve both had dogs. Children can’t be too much harder than that, can they?”

“Dogs are great, but I get the feeling it’s not exactly the same thing. I mean, I used to let Vic-chan eat lunch meat I dropped directly off the floor and I’m pretty sure you aren’t supposed to let kids do that.” Yuri couldn’t help but laugh. This whole conversation suddenly felt utterly ridiculous “Besides, just the other day I saw you slip Makkachin an old shoe that really should have been thrown away just because he gave you those puppy dog eyes. Any kids we would have would walk all over you.”

“That… That is a valid point.” Victor joined in along with Yuri’s laughter. “Alright. I agree that dogs are not exactly the most accurate way to practice. That doesn’t mean we wouldn’t figure it out, and we wouldn’t have to do it alone. We’d have plenty of help.”
They sat in comfortable silence for a moment after that. Victor was looking at Yuri with warmth in his eyes and Yuri took a deep breath as he tried to imagine it again. It was a bit easier with Victor right in front of him, with no one in the room but the two of them. Wisps of images flashed through his mind. Nothing solid. Nothing he could really grab onto, but they were there, perhaps lacking in true definition, but it was certainly more than the blank slate that had been there before.

“You’ve seriously never thought about it before?” Victor seemed to be more stuck on that point than Yuri was and Yuri simply shrugged again. “I know, I know. Biology… But there are other ways. I would know. I’ve gone over all the options with my Father and his advisors from the moment I decided to have an all male Selection. So, unless you’re hiding something about your own biology, the natural way hasn't exactly been something I’ve considered much myself.”

“You really don’t know much about exactly how much things cost, do you?” Yuri wasn’t teasing any longer. He really wanted to know.

“I know enough to be able to follow along when the ministers of finance are talking about the country’s budget, but I do admit that I’m a little out of touch with the rate of certain goods and services.” Now Victor was the one looking a bit uncomfortable. It was not a side of him Yuri had seen before. “I get the feeling I’m about to find out.”

Yuri let out a tired huff of laughter.

“It’s expensive. At the salary I was making before I had to leave the ballet, I would have to work for five years without spending a penny on anything in order to afford surrogacy.” Yuri shifted closer to Victor on the couch, lowering his voice even though they were the only two in the room and far enough away from the door that no one would be able to hear them even if they were speaking at normal tones. “Adoption is worse. To adopt would mean paying fees to the agency as well as any fees necessary to move the child up to the same caste as me. Since Twos and Threes tend to end up first on the list if there is an orphaned Four, Five, or even Sixes… I would be limited in which children would be available. I’m assuming you don’t know how much it costs to move up from a Seven or Eight to a Five…”

“I do not.” Victor’s brows furrowed and he looked as though he was trying to swallow down something that had left a sour taste in his mouth. “I get the feeling that knowing the real figure isn’t going to make me feel any better, though.”

“It won’t…” Yuri hesitated for a moment, unsure if he wanted to go on before making his decision. Victor had asked for his trust and Yuri had promised to give it to him. He had to have faith that Victor wouldn’t give him a reason to regret giving that trust. “Victor, there’s more, but it has to stay a
secret. It *has* to. No matter what.”

“I promise. Whatever you say will not leave this room.” Victor had never looked more serious in the entire time Yuri had known him. “I give you my word as Crown Prince.”

“Okay… Okay…” Yuri pulled at where their hands were still joined together until Victor got the hint and shuffled closer until they were practically in each other’s laps. “Do you remember when I told you about my friend, Yuko? The one who took dance lessons with me?”

“Yes.” Victor nodded, looking confused again, but when he didn’t say anything further, Yuri continued.

“Well, there was another kid we used to play with when we were younger. A boy who lived a few streets over. His name was Takeshi and he is a Six.” Yuri ran his free hand through his hair. “They were both a few years older than I was and, at some point, they started dating.”

“They didn’t tell anyone. They didn’t even tell me until I came home from my lessons early one day and I went over to see if Yuko was home and I found them in her backyard. I didn’t tell anyone either. Yuko’s parents wouldn’t have been happy to see her with someone below her caste and Takeshi was taking on as many jobs as he could to save money.” Yuri rubbed small circles against the skin on the back of Victor’s hand as he spoke to ground himself. “He wanted to scrape enough together to pay for the fees to apply to be a Five. What they planned to do after that, they never told me. I’m pretty sure Takeshi didn’t have a creative bone in his body, but for Yuko I know he would have found something.”

“He wasn’t able to get together the money?” Victor asked quietly.

“He didn’t get the chance.” Yuri paused. So far he hadn’t said anything incriminating. It wasn’t against the law to date below one’s caste. “I didn’t exactly ask for the details of *how* it happen, but… Yuko got pregnant.”

This was the point where Yuri almost expected Victor to pull back. For him to stop Yuri before he went any further. For him to retreat back into being the prince. A prince who had just heard someone admit to knowing about someone else breaking the law, and who clearly about to admit to being part of the cover-up.

But Victor didn’t pull away. He just nodded.
“The triplets?” Yuri let out a shaky breath as Victor asked the question, nodding in response. “How…? How did your family end up with them?”

“That’s…” Yuri closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the couch.

“You don’t have to say.” Victor gripped Yuri’s hand even tighter and when Yuri opened his eyes again, there wasn’t any trace of judgement, only concern.

“We got by well enough. Mom made a few large sculptures before she took up pottery and they sold well and Dad had a few books that sold well enough to ensure a fairly steady income. Mari helped with her paintings and I did work around the dance studio every day in exchange for my lessons in order to help save money and every so often I would get paid to dance in productions with the company in the city not too far from our home.” Yuri adjusted his glasses from where they had been pushed slightly askew when he’d leant against the couch. “Mom still had some family back in the Japanese territories of New Asia and we had a lot built up in savings… Almost enough for Mom, Dad, and Mari to apply to be Fours. Dad… Dad always wanted to own a business of his own, maybe a restaurant. Mom’s cooking was so good all our neighbors would pay her to cook meals for them whenever she had enough spare time… In any case, Fives can’t legally own a business and all I wanted was to dance. I already had a few small offers from different companies and they figured there would be money enough for me once I was done with that so long as their restaurant did well.”

“Anyways, Mom made up a story about an aunt falling ill back in Japan and needing assistance. She also pretended she was the one pregnant and offered to pay Yuko’s family if they would let her accompany her for the trip. We told everyone we didn’t know how long Mom was going to need to be gone and she might need a hand with any new baby in case she had to stay that long and I couldn’t leave my teachers and Mari was just starting to get her work in galleries, so neither of us were a good option and even though I was sixteen and Mari was eighteen, they said they didn’t want to leave us without at least one parent…” Yuri shook his head slowly. “I still can’t believe it worked. Between the plane tickets, the passport fees, visa applications, and straight up bribes, it took us all our savings, but Mom’s family was from a small town and it was easier than expected to forge a birth certificate once they got there. A year later and they both returned with three new sisters for Mari and I.”

“I don’t know much more after that. A year later and I was gone to the National Ballet.” Yuri was starting to feel nervous. Victor’s face was carefully blank now, giving away nothing he was thinking. “I just remembered thinking… All that fuss. All that pain… How could I think about having a family when my two best friends would have to spend the rest of their lives watching their daughters grow up two streets over and not be able to say anything because if they did all of us would go to jail? So I just didn’t think about it.”
His story over, Yuri waited, every muscle in his body wound tight to the point where he was afraid he was going to snap in half at the slightest provocation. In a way, it felt good to have told it. He’d never said a word to anyone, never even acknowledged it to his family or to Yuko or Takeshi. They never mentioned it or spoke of it after everything was done and it was like a weight had been lifted off him to finally be able to talk about it after carrying the secret close to his chest for so long.

But underneath that relief was the coppery taste of fear. He’d just admitted to being a part of breaking the law to someone who was one step removed from being the highest authority in the country. If Victor wanted, he could be arrested on the spot. Police could be at their home in Carolina in a matter of hours, taking everyone away without any warning. He’d handed over a lot more than just trust to Victor and, while he knew Victor wasn’t like that, a small part of him could help but worry.

It felt like hours before Victor moved, but Yuri was sure it had been barely more than a minute and, instead of pushing him away like Yuri feared he would, Victor pulled him close. Yuri allowed himself to be pulled, falling against Victor’s broad chest as the other man’s strong arms wrapped around him and a hand began stroking his hair even as the other was holding his shoulder tight enough to bruise.

“Oh, Yuri…” Victor buried his face in Yuri’s hair and for the first time the evening Yuri let everything go. All the tension and unease, all the nervous energy and worry rushed out of him in a wave and left him lying boneless and limp in Victor’s embrace. “That was… You’re all so brave…”

“Some would call it stupid.” Yuri pointed out, words slightly muffled by Victor’s shoulder, but the prince must have heard them all the same because there was a rumble of half-suppressed laughter that vibrated from his chest to Yuri’s.

“They would also be right.” Victor pushed him back so that they could look each other in the eye. There was no hint of judgement on the prince’s face. Only a mixture of concern and possibly relief. “Brave, but very, very stupid.”

“It was the right thing to do.” Yuri was quick to defend his family’s actions. They had, after all, known exactly what they were getting into when Yuko had come to them in tears. They had known the risks they were taking, what they all stood to lose. His tone must have been harsher than he had intended it to be because there was a flash of something like looked like hurt that crossed Victor’s face, so Yuri repeated himself, this time speaking softer and punctuating his statement by brushing Victor’s silver bangs off his forehead gently. “It was the right thing to do.”

“Yes, it was.” Now it was Victor’s turn to pause and hesitate and Yuri waited, calmer now that he was more certain than ever that his fears had been unfounded. Now that he knew his trust hadn’t been misplaced. “I wish… I wish there was something I could do…”
“What’s done is done. There’s no going back into the past.” Yuri was quick to cut Victor off before he could really get going. He wasn’t looking for any apologies. “I don’t claim to know much of anything about making, amending, and abolishing laws, but… Well, it’s too late for Yuko, but it’s not too late for someone else. To stop others from having to make the same hard choices.”

Victor made a strangled, half-noise in the back of his throat before clearing it so he could speak again. “I know. I’m… I’m trying. I promised I was never going to lie to you Yuri, so I won’t. There are a lot of things I don’t know and a lot of things I should… I can’t promise that change will come tomorrow, or even five years from now, but I can promise you that I know it’s needed. There has to be a better way.”

“You do?” All of the confidence Victor usually carried was gone now. He sounded just as small and lost as Yuri felt sometimes and Yuri felt an intense surge of something overwhelming stab his heart as he noticed the hand Victor had in his hair was trembling. It felt like Victor was the one that was afraid that Yuri would be disappointed in him.

“I do.” Yuri affirmed. He had never thought that the tables would one day be turned and he would be the one comforting Victor, but that was exactly what was happening. “While I’m here… While I’m here I want to help. I should help. I’m not exactly sure how, but there has to be something I can do.”

“You are helping.” Victor’s hand left Yuri’s hair and slid down to the nape of his neck, the pads of his fingers swiping back and forth along the sensitive skin there and causing a shiver to roll down Yuri’s spine. “Just being here is helping. I’ve always thought I was going to have to do this alone, but I don’t have to. I have you.”

“I have you.”
First of all, every single one of you guys are absolutely amazing and I am beyond honored at how many people comment, leave kudos, or recommend this fic to others. I love y'all so much!

Second, it looks like I'm more or less working on a once a week type update schedule. There's a few reasons behind that. For one, each chapter keeps getting longer and longer. For another, I'm working full time and I'm also an amateur athlete and I've been completely cleared at last from the broken ankle/other medical issues at the beginning of the year so my writing time is more limited as I'm already behind the eight ball as far as my competition year is concerned...

Thank you all for your continued support and patience!

Chapter 19 – Tests

“They want us to start doing what?” Leo had turned pale and almost dropped the book he’d been reading to the floor.

Chris sighed and rolled his eyes, repeating himself after a dramatic flourish of a hand through the air. “Starting this Friday, they want us to be a part of a special roundtable discussion during a segment of The Report. Answering questions about our personal viewpoints on different aspects of politics, what we think about the current affairs of the country… Things like that. You seriously didn’t see that coming?”

“No, I didn’t see it coming.” Leo shot back, grabbing his book from his lap and snapping it shut. “It’s it bad enough that we’re constantly being asked questions about our personal lives. Do they really need to ask us about our politics, too?”

“Makes sense to me.” Yuri shrugged even as Leo shot him a disbelieving glare. “Unlike our previous love lives or our innermost thoughts about whether or not we swooned the first time we set eyes on Victor, our political views are actually kind of important. Whoever Victor marries will eventually have the ear of the king, after all.”

“They can’t honestly think that Victor would really listen to one of us over his other advisors or his father or his own views.” Guang Hong put in quietly.
“For the right person, I would bet he would.” Chris cut in, not even looking up from the game of chess he was currently playing with Phichit. “I would also bet this is for as much for Victor as it is for the people. He needs to know who aligns the closest to his viewpoints and who is able to give diplomatic answers under pressure.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, Chris is right. Again.” Phichit scratched at the back of his neck as he stared down at the chessboard in front of him before picking up a knight and moving it across the board, leaning back once he was done and flicking his grey eyes up to the rest of his friends. “We really should have seen it coming.”

“Yuri.” Yuri jumped a bit in his seat and twisted around to look at where Seung-Gil was sitting at a table off to their left, his pen hovering over the letter he’d been writing and his dark eyes focused on Yuri now. Surprised at being called out directly by the typically introverted man, Yuri sputtered a bit before nodding in acknowledgement. “You spend the most time with Victor. Do you think he is really the kind of person who would actually change his decisions based on what his spouse wanted or believed?”

“Oh, um…” Yuri struggled for a moment to come up with an answer, still a little thrown that Seung-Gil was actually asking him a question. Not that he didn’t like the other man, it was more that he kept to himself even more than Yuri did and they’d probably exchanged only a handful of words with each other up until that point. Well, that and the question he had thought to ask when he finally did decide to talk to Yuri had to be one of the hardest ones Yuri had been asked about Victor yet. “Well… It depends on what it is, I would think. He wouldn’t just do whatever someone asked if it wasn’t in the best interest of the country, but he wouldn’t dismiss anything immediately no matter who did the asking. I don’t know if he would actually change a decision because someone he cared about asked him to, but it would probably cause him to pause and re-evaluate the situation, maybe take a look at it from another angle he normally wouldn’t have considered…”

“I agree with Yuri.” Chris still didn’t look up from his game as he spoke again. “As far as I can tell Victor doesn’t do things just because someone tells him to, but he’s never struck me as someone who would be opposed to listening to someone else. Especially if it was something important to the person doing the asking.”

“Obviously he can be impulsive, but he’s not as self-absorbed as some people make him out to be.” Phichit clucked his tongue as Chris finally made his move, frowning as he surveyed the changed board in front of him. “I, too, agree with Yuri. If someone asked, he’d definitely listen, but he wouldn’t let that force him into a decision he didn’t think was right in the end. I can’t say I’m looking forward to having Victor and the whole country judging my political viewpoints, though.”

“I’m more worried about the country than Victor.” Yuri fiddled with one of the chess pieces that had
already been discarded from Chris and Phichit’s game. “Anything they could ask us isn’t anything he
doesn’t already know. At least, I’ve talked to him about politics often enough that he should know
by now.”

“You seriously spend your time with him talking about politics?” JJ coughed a bit as he had almost
choked on the tea he’d been sipping before he’d spun around and jumped into the conversation.
“Seriously?”

“You don’t?” Yuri asked. “I mean, we talk about other things, too. It’s not all politics.”

“Son of a bitch… He’s serious.” JJ shook his head like he still couldn’t believe it. “You’ve already
blown past all the interesting topics to the point where you’re resorting to talking about something
boring like politics.”

“You know, not all of us think politics are boring.” Seung-Gil was about as close to a glare as Yuri
had ever seen him. “Granted, I can’t say he’s ever seemed particularly eager to bring up the topic in
my experience either.”

“I don’t know. I just ask him how his day went and sometimes we end up talking about whatever
goes on behind those closed doors in those meetings he’s always being drug off to.” Yuri shrugged,
rounding his shoulders and picking up the book he’d abandoned on the table when the conversation
had begun. It very rarely worked when he pretended to be engrossed in reading, but he never
stopped trying whenever he was starting to feel out of his depth in a conversation with the other
Elite. “You can ask him, too. He’d tell you if you asked.”

“You talk to him a lot more than we think you do, don’t you?” Guang Hong’s voice was soft, but it
was still enough to be heard by everyone in the room and the smaller man colored a bit as most of the
eyes shot to him. “They haven’t let you go off the property with him since that time the two of you
disappeared after the library thing and you don’t get assigned to sit together at meals…”

Yuri fought down the urge to suck his bottom lip into his mouth and start chewing on it. The last
thing he wanted was for them to see him react nervously to what Guang Hong had said. He also
didn’t want them to know about his almost nightly meetings with Victor. That was something that
belonged to him and he did not want any of them trying to pressure Victor into spending time in the
evenings with them instead.

The others had their day dates out in the city and around the palace and Yuri had Victor in the
evenings.
And he was not going to give up those meetings without a fight. Sometimes it was the only thing that got him through the day. Knowing that he had a few hours to spend curled up with Victor while they talked about everything and nothing to look forward to at the end of the day. It was their time and he was not going to share it or cut it short if he could help it.

“I still take Makkachin out during the days. Victor tries to make some time in the afternoon to drop by and pick him back up. We’ll talk for a bit then.” That was at least partially the truth. Victor did sometimes try to catch a small break from whatever he had going on to retrieve his poodle in person, but those meetings usually never lasted for more than five minutes or so. Not nearly long enough to have a proper conversation, but they didn’t need to know that.

“You really should talk to whoever sets up the seating assignments for meals. It’s starting to lean towards completely unfair how often they keep an entire table between you and Victor.” Phichit had either given up on pondering his next move or thought staring at Yuri was a better use of him time. “It’s almost like they’re doing it on purpose.”

“It’s fine, Phichit. I don’t mind.” Yuri did mind. He minded a lot, but, again, he wasn’t about to complain in a room full of people who were still fighting for whatever bits of Victor’s attention the prince was willing and able to give. As much as he wanted Victor for himself, now more so than ever before, he also didn’t want to get into a fight with men he was still going to have to live amicably with for who knew how much longer. As Phichit raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth to say something else, Yuri forged onwards, not giving him a chance. “I didn’t say I was happy about it, but I don’t see how complaining about it is going to help matters any.”

“Fair enough.” Chris flicked an abandoned pawn towards Phichit to get his attention. “Leave Yuri alone and play your turn.”

“Fine, fine.” Phichit shot Yuri a look that said they weren’t entirely done with the conversation, but he turned back to the board in front of him without another word.

Yuri was fairly certain Chris had only meant for Phichit to leave him alone, but, even though most of the others still sent him odds looks from time to time, no one else picked up the dropped thread of the conversation either. Usually the weight of whatever they were thinking about him would feel stifling, but today it didn’t. It wasn’t any of their business when he did or didn’t see Victor.

It never had been.
After the tension of the morning, most of the Elite split up after lunch. Phichit and Leo had gone out into the garden with Yuri, keeping him company while Yuri idly tossed a ball for Makkachin, allowing the poodle to stretch his legs under the shade of the willow trees.

Spending time with Makkachin always helped Yuri feel better and Phichit and Leo never poked or prodded at sore spots when they were alone. It was nice to spend time with friends without having to worry about them judging him for every little thing.

They had only been out for about an hour when the sky started getting dark and the sound of thunder in the distance became audible, driving them inside. Phichit and Leo went ahead to a parlor they liked on the first floor not too far from the Entertaining Room, saying they were going to order some tea and biscuits from the kitchen and leaving the invitation open for Yuri to join them if he wanted to.

He left them with a promise to think about joining them in a bit and went to put Makkachin safely in his room where either Victor or Minako could retrieve him later.

Yuri spent about ten minutes cuddling with Makkachin and making sure the dog was comfortable in the large dog bed Minako had brought to keep in a corner of the room months ago when he’d first made his arrangement with Victor. Yuri wasn’t actually sure why he bothered since the dog would be curled up on the pillows on his bed by the time he or anyone else came back up to the room, but he still completed the ritual anyway. Tucking one of Makkachin’s favorite blankets in with him and checking the water bowl he kept in the bathroom to make sure it was still full before leaving again.

He’d been intending on joining Phichit and Leo after all, not quite wanting to be alone for once and figuring their company wouldn’t be too much. Phichit was getting better at reading Yuri’s moods and keeping his shenanigans to a minimum when they were all alone together.

His way from the second floor to his destination on the first floor took him past the library. Usually the room was left closed in an effort to keep any comings and goings in the hall from disturbing anyone who might be trying to read within, but today the door was slightly ajar and that caused Yuri to pause, hand outstretched to close it before he really had a chance to notice he was doing it.

“In that case, what’s the point of us still being here at all? Victor might as well choose Yuri once and for all and be done with it.”
The sound of his name had Yuri frozen to the spot even as every instinct in his body was screaming at him that this was not a conversation he wanted to be caught eavesdropping on. Or that anything that would proceed JJ’s excessively loud statement would be something he wanted to hear.

“I’m sure they both have their reasons. Reasons neither one of them are going to tell any of us.” Yuri recognized the new voice as Seung-Gil’s. “Quite frankly, it’s none of our business.”

“It is our business. If they’re sneaking off together under our noses, it’s our business.” There was the muffled sound of shoes on carpet and Yuri got the feeling that JJ was beginning to pace back and forth. “That’s got to be cheating somehow.”

“Considering none of us are the ones making the rules, I get the feeling that you’d be hard pressed to make that accusation stick.” Georgi was speaking softly enough that for a moment Yuri wasn’t sure it was him, but after another rustle of movement from the other side of the door, his voice came through a little clearer. “Why does it matter to you anyway? You’ve already said roughly a million times that you’d rather go back to your career once this is all over with.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to just step aside and let someone else *win*.” JJ spat out that last word like it caused him physical pain to say it.

“For fuck’s sake… This isn’t about *winning*.” Georgi sounded more agitated than Yuri had ever heard him. “Do you love Victor?”

“Well… I… Maybe if I had a better chance…”

“That’s not what I asked.” Georgi cut JJ off before he could babble any further. “This *never* should have been a game or a competition, no matter what context they framed it in. Do you really want to be in a marriage with someone you don’t love? Can you really be that self-absorbed? Because, in my opinion, ending up knowing that if you marry the prince you are going to be left here without a lot of hope of ever actually having a chance at real love doesn’t feel a lot like ‘winning’ to me.”

There was a long silence then and Yuri trembled in the hall, torn between running away and wanting to hear the end of it. Like being the witness to a horrible accident, he couldn’t pull away no matter how much he wanted to.

“Georgi is right.” Seung-Gil’s tone was flat and unimpressed as usual. “I can’t say I’ve had much experience with love, but I do know enough to guess that winning here would end up feeling a lot
more like losing in the long run.”

Another silence and then JJ spoke up again.

“İt’s barely been three months. Do you really think they’re in love already?”

“I think they’re definitely in something…”

Yuri didn’t get a chance to hear where the rest of that sentence was going to go because all three voices began to move towards the door and Yuri bolted at last, not willing to take the risk of standing there and having them open the door to find him on the other side.

He hurried as fast as he dared, blind to exactly which direction he was heading in. All he knew was that he wanted to put as much distance between himself and the library as possible. Sorting through what he had heard within would have to wait.

His allowed his feet to take him down twisting hallways without caring for the direction and, due to his distraction, he didn’t even notice the other person barreling down on him as he turned a corner until they had collided into each other.

“Watch where you’re fucking going!” The force of their impact had caused both Yuri and Yurio to stumble back a few steps and the young prince tossed his bangs out of his eyes and leveled an impressive glare in Yuri’s direction. Then, seeming to notice exactly who it was he had run into for the first time, his expression softened a tiny bit. “Oh, Yuri. It’s you. Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you.”

“You have?” Yuri’s head was still spinning from what he had overheard moments ago, and he couldn’t even begin to think of a reason why Yurio would have been seeking him out. He didn’t recall making plans with the other boy. “Were we supposed to be meeting for something…?”

“No, but I feel the urge to hit someone with a blunted foil and Beka’s gone off somewhere so you’ll have to do. Why? Do you have something better to do?” Yurio didn’t wait for Yuri to answer before he grabbed Yuri’s arm and began to tug him along behind him and towards the back of the palace where there was a side door that would let them out close to the dance studio.

“N-No.” Yuri stumbled for the first few steps before he gained his balance and allowed himself to be
pulled. “No, I don’t have anything planned.”

Now that Yurio mentioned it, hitting something sounded like a good way to pass the time. He might not be good enough to hold his own against the young prince for more than a few minutes or so, but there was a certain appeal to the exercise.

At the very least, it was difficult to think of much else when he was trying to avoid getting bruised up by an angry Yurio.

“Good.” Yurio, apparently realizing Yuri wasn’t protesting or trying to get out of it, dropped his wrist even as he didn’t slow his stride, leaving Yuri to hurry along after him.

They didn’t say anything as they rushed through the door to the outside, sprinting their way between the sparse raindrops that were beginning to fall. Neither did they speak once they were safely in the studio, Yurio making a beeline to the closet that held all the fencing equipment as Yuri took care of pulling the door shut and flipping the lock into place.

Usually he wouldn’t have bothered with the lock, but it was painfully clear that there was something bothering Yurio beyond his typical gruffness and teenage angst. At least with the door locked, anyone who would want to interrupt would have to make their presence known well in advance instead of bursting in and taking either of them off guard.

As much as Yuri wanted to ask the boy if he was okay, it was very clear that he wasn’t and Yurio never had been the kind to answer questions like that. Either he would eventually tell Yuri what was bothering him or he wouldn’t. Pushing wasn’t going to do any good and would be more likely to drive Yurio away than to get him to talk.

They stretched in silence as well, Yurio brooding and Yuri keeping an eye on him as best he could without openly staring. Anything else that had been bothering Yuri was now pushed to the back of his mind. Yuri was intimately familiar with the use of exercise to burn off excess feelings and energy and Yurio looked like he was about ready to explode, meaning their stretching ended far quicker than it probably should have.

Not that it mattered much, Yuri had known even before he’d agreed to come along that he wasn’t going to be able to challenge Yurio. His knee was still twinging in discomfort from his overuse of it over the long weekend and Yuri didn’t have anywhere near the same level of skill as the prince did even if he was at peak strength, but he was determined to do his best.
Do his best and then all that would be left would be for him to hope that Yurio would talk to him once they were done. He wasn’t going to feel well at all if he left without getting at least a better idea of what was wrong.

Besides, focusing on Yurio’s problems was a much more appealing option than focusing on his own at the moment.

About an hour later, Yuri tugged off his facemask and tossed it into the corner of the room. He bent over and rested his weight with his hands on each knee, gasping for breath and blinking sweat out of his eyes. Across the room Yurio mirrored his position, his own mask dropped down to the floor between his feet.

“You’ve gotten better.” Yurio ground out the words as though he regretted even thinking them, much less saying them. In response, Yuri just slumped to the floor with a loud groan.

“Thanks.” Yuri fumbled with the straps holding his chest protector to his body and flung it away from him as soon as he was free of it. He winced as he unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt. He hadn’t exactly been given a chance to change before being drug away and the clothes he was wearing might have been lightweight and made for summer weather, but they had not been made for this kind of exercise. “Not that I’m the best judge of these matters, but you’ve gotten better, too, I think. Or faster in any case.”

Yurio grunted in response, tossing his own equipment aside and lowering himself much more gracefully to the ground than Yuri had been able to manage. Of course, Yuri was now sure his bruises had bruises so not being able to exhibit any form of grace wasn’t too terribly high on his priority list.

“You’re just slower.” Yurio sighed and moved to lie flat on the floor, staring up at the ceiling while his chest rose and fell with his deep breaths. “You shouldn’t have been running around like a fucking lunatic with those kids the other day or you’d be significantly less useless now.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll keep that in mind next time.” Yuri responded flatly as he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and stretched his right leg out next to him, trying to stretch out the tense muscles before his knee seized up on him completely. “Feel better at least?”

“A bit.” For a long moment Yuri wasn’t sure if Yurio was going to say anything further, but eventually he let out a loud huff of air and frowned, not sitting up or looking over at Yuri, but speaking to him all the same. “It’s stupid. I’ll be fine.”
“I’m sure you will be.” Yuri said sincerely. “You’re strong enough to do whatever you want if you put your mind to it. Stubborn enough, too.”

Yurio let out a sharp bark of laughter at that. “You’re probably the first person I’ve ever met that has listed fucking stubbornness as a virtue. But… I guess that makes sense. You’re stubborn, too. When you want to be.”

Yuri hummed in agreement, focusing on massaging the muscle of his right thigh. It wasn’t like he had anything to rebut that statement with. Yurio was right. He was stubborn. It had both helped and hurt him in equal measures in the past before he’d learned to channel it in the right ways.

“I hate this time of year.” Yurio still hadn’t budged and Yuri kept an eye on him through the mirror and still out of the corner of his eye, keeping most of his attention on continuing to massage his leg. “It’s one of the few times when they won’t just let me fucking be.”

“I’ve noticed that.” Yuri agreed idly. He had noticed. It had been hard not to. Yurio’s presence at events both official and social had been mostly voluntary up until that point, but ever since the other set of royals had arrived Yuri had noticed Otabeck lingering in the shadows and blocking convenient and inconvenient exits alike making him think things were now more mandatory for the time being. “They’ll be gone soon.”

Yurio grunted in response. “Yes, they will. But they won’t be gone for anywhere near long enough.”

“If I’m free, I don’t mind coming out here with you.” Yuri was quick to offer at least that much. “I can’t say I’m going to be up for this much each time, but if it’ll help… I’m actually starting to like learning how to do this.”

“You don’t have to say that if you don’t mean it.” Yuri heaved himself up into a sitting position, folding his arms over his chest and giving Yuri a fierce one-eyed glare from beneath his blonde fringe. “You’re not obligated to do anything for me. Victor doesn’t listen to a fucking word I say so if you think you need to play nice with me to keep him happy…”

“I’m not lying and I don’t need you or anyone else to put a good word in for me.” Yuri snapped before he had a chance to stop himself or phrase his statement in a different way.

“Uh-huh…” Yurio was looking less angry and more curious now. “You’re not fucking wrong,
though. The stupid idiot has been head over heels for you for what feels like forever.”

“I don’t know about that.” Yuri cursed his tendency to stutter at the most inopportune moments. He cleared his throat and sat up as straight as he could in his position on the floor. Time to go back to the original subject. “Anyways, that doesn’t matter. I was being serious. It’s an interesting sport. Fencing, that is. It’s kind of like a different way of dancing and I’ve always enjoyed learning new styles of dance. How long have you been practicing this?”

“I don’t know. About as long as I’ve been walking, I guess.” Yurio shrugged. “Victor used to do all kinds of sports when he was younger, but this was something that required a partner. I started to learn so he would have someone to practice with in the future, but Father eventually drew him more into learning how to run the country someday than how to kick a ball really hard, or whatever else he did in his spare time. When Victor quit, I just kept going. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I like hitting things. At least with this I have an excuse.”

“Who taught you?” Yuri asked.

“I had a tutor at first. The same one that taught Victor. When Victor lost interest, they sent him away.” Yurio was scowling again. “Some of the guards around here knew how, though, and when Lilia got here she liked the thought of someone using this place for something so she encouraged it. Then they assigned Beka as my personal guard and… Well, you’ve seen him. He’s good enough that he’s taught me a few things.”

“Have you ever thought of getting another tutor?” Yuri pressed. He was sure he was about to get his head bitten off if he didn’t stop soon, but this was the first time Yurio had really opened up to him, even if it was a small peek and nothing more. Getting yelled at was more than worth it at this point in his opinion. “You have talent. I might not be an expert, but I can see that much. If you had someone who really knew what they were doing helping you…”

“I’ve never bothered to ask.” Yurio cut him off with a quick slice of his hand through the air. “It’s not fucking important. Just something I screw around with when I have time.”

Sensing Yurio wasn’t going to give him any more, Yuri let it drop, changing the subject to something less likely to cause an emotional reaction from either of them.

Although, as someone who quite frequently told people things weren’t important when they really were, Yuri knew that Yurio had given him a lot more than he’d intended. Now, he just had to decide what, if anything, he was going to do with that information.
When they were called into the broadcasting room Friday morning after breakfast to tape their roundtable segment for the special edition of *The Report* that evening, Yuri wasn’t necessarily feeling much better. Victor had been busy for most of the week and no one had really gotten a chance to see him. Yurio kept dragging him away to add to his growing collection of welts and bruises, and some of the other Elite were still kind of circling him warily, causing his anxiety to spike even as his logical brain kept yelling that there was nothing to be worried about.

All in all, he had been in one of those odd states where he wasn’t quite on the edge of a mental breakdown, but he also wasn’t as calm and confident as he knew he should be either.

“Are we practicing or pre-taping this? I don’t understand.” Leo had been watching some of the camera people as they tested out different angles of the large, semi-circular table that had been placed in the center of the room. “I thought this whole thing was being billed as broadcasting live.”

“Are you seriously complaining about us getting practice time?” Phichit asked, as he pointed the business end of his mascara wand in the other man’s general direction. “I, for one, do not want to go out there cold turkey, but if you do…”

“What? That’s not what I meant!” Leo protested.

“It’s not going to be live.” Chris piped in from his own seat. He’d already come down mostly ready to go, so he’d been surveying the scene more than actively taking a part in the preparations so far. “First, they wouldn’t get us all made up like this if they weren’t going to tape and air whatever they have us doing right now. Second, a ten second delay isn’t going to mean much if someone goes too far off the beaten path. The powers that be wouldn’t want any one of us accidentally inciting a riot, now would they?”

Yuri scoffed and rolled his eyes, knowing enough about Chris now to tell when he was being melodramatic. The other man did have a bit of a point underneath the dramatics, though. The last thing the crown’s media advisors would want would be for one of them to express an unpopular opinion that couldn’t be easily walked back.

Even Victor wouldn’t be able to save them if they talked him into a corner, even if they hadn’t meant to do it.
“They better not keep the cameras on me for too long then. My perfect face has been known to cause a riot or two.” JJ smirked even as literally everyone present, even some of the crew members, groaned. JJ sighed in response. “Too far?”

“Way too far, buddy. Way too far.” Emil pat JJ on the back and offered up a pained smile as they both turned back to their own preparations.

“I’m impressed. It’s been almost a whole week since he’s said something ridiculous like that.” Phichit mumbled, the other noises in the room keeping his comments heard only by Yuri and Chris who were the closest to him. Raising his voice to a more normal tone, he went on, smirking a bit as he noticed Chris hiding a laugh behind his hand and Yuri turning his head in an effort to not let anyone see him smile in amusement. “I don’t care what the reasons are. I just hope this doesn’t drag out past lunch like yesterday’s prep session did. I was so hungry I was about to eat the cushion off my chair.”

“What stopped you? I would have paid good money to see that.” Chris joked back, dodging as Phichit threw a tube of lip gloss at Chris’ head, causing Yuri to duck as he was sitting between the pair.

“Hey!” Yuri slipped out of his chair and spun around. “Don’t put me in the middle of this.”

“Did you hear that, my friend?” There was a twinkle in Chris’ green eyes that had Yuri worried he had just made a grave mistake. “He doesn’t want to be put in the middle.”

“So I heard.” And with Phichit’s evil grin, Yuri knew he’d made a mistake. “He can’t be in the middle if we’re both coming for him, now can he?”

And that was how they ended up covered in Chris’ face powder when Mila showed up to usher them to their places, the girl taking one look at them before sighing and snapping her fingers in order to call forth a veritable army of attendants to clean them off and make them presentable again.

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It didn’t take long to clean their mess and get them set up in their places at the table. Yuri took a deep breath as he forced himself to sit still in his chair, desperately trying to ignore those working the cameras as they did a last minute check of all the angles and equipment.
When he’d been joking around with Chris and Phichit it had been easy to forget exactly why they were here under the bright studio lights on a Friday morning. Now all he could do was look around the horse-shoe shaped table at the faces of the other Elite and remember that this was actually very important. No matter what descriptors they tried to hide it under, Yuri saw it for what it was… A test. A test he was desperate to pass.

“I’ll bet they’ve been giving us harder questions in our prep sessions than they’ll give us here.” Yuri heard Guang Hong, who was sitting to his immediate right, whisper to Leo. “We’ll be fine.”

Yuri couldn’t make out what Leo whispered back, but Gung Hong chuckled softly and shook his head and Leo did look a bit more relaxed than he had a moment before. He glanced over to his left, wishing it was Phichit sitting there instead of Chris. Not that he didn’t like Chris, but the other man could be a bit on the unpredictable side, saying things mostly for their shock value from time to time and the last thing Yuri wanted was for Chris to mumble something that would mess with his concentration, even if he knew Chris wouldn’t do anything that would mess him up on purpose.

All he could do was hope that Chris would stay on his best behavior for once as the production assists starting waving their hands for everyone to be quiet.

As usual, Morooka was to be the moderator and he took his place in his own seat off to the side of everyone else after giving them a few words of encouragement and a silence fell over the set for a brief moment.

“Good morning, gentlemen.” The host was cheerful as he always was, grinning widely for both them and the cameras. “We’re going to do things a little bit differently today since this won’t be live. The hope is that it’ll take some of the stress off of all of us.”

“Everything is going to be more on the informal side of the coin for this segment. The country wants to know what you think about several different issues. I’ll act as a moderator and direct questions as needed, but what we really want is for you to talk amongst yourselves. Kind of like a nine person debate.” Yuri wasn’t the only one that was hanging off Morooka’s every word and nodding along like a bobblehead with each syllable. About half of the others were doing the same. “We’ve got a few hours penciled in here, most of which is going to be cut and edited to be aired in a special segment right before the usual Report broadcast. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers here. This is about showing the country how you feel, so the more natural your responses, the better!”
The newscaster went on for about another minute, encouraging them to relax and enjoy themselves. Yuri let most of his words bounce off of him, neither allowing them to relax him nor poke at the nerves that had settled in the pit of his stomach. He idly wondered if he was ever going to get used to this kind of thing. Cameras crawling all over the halls and surprise interviews sprung on him while he was going about his day didn’t even phase him any longer, but there was something about how prepared some of The Report segments were that still bothered him on a deeper level than everything else. Something about the smooth veneer that was coated on all their interactions in this studio.

As much as he wanted to relax and pretend the cameras weren’t even there like he could on most other occasions, he wasn’t able to shake the feeling of being in the middle of a performance.

He only hoped he could either contain that feeling for long enough to get through this or get rid of it entirely once they were underway. Morooka was right. No one was going to be happy if Yuri looked like he was on pins and needles the entire time. He needed to project an air of relaxed confidence even if he wasn’t able to actually feel it.

“Without further ado, let’s have our first topic of discussion.” Morooka surveyed the table of waiting men with a smile that was intended to put them at ease. His eyes fell upon Emil, who was at the end of the table closest to him. “Emil. You were studying to be a teacher before being Selected. Recently all of you took part in a ceremony opening a new wing at a local library where a pilot program for free summer sessions and after school education programs. From a teacher’s point of view, what do you think about it?”

If Emil was put off by being the first one up on the chopping block he didn’t show it at all. He simply smiled that same affable grin he always did and launched into praises the facility and providing and anecdote from a conversation he’d had with one of the volunteer teachers when they’d been there.

At least they had started with a somewhat easy topic. Yuri didn’t really have an opinion either way, so it was easy to respond to Seung-Gil with a carefully neutral response when the other man asked if Yuri agreed that expanding the program was a good idea. He passed the question over to Phichit and went back to listening politely, relaxing some despite the bead of sweat he could feel rolling down the nape of his neck from the lights above them.

The whole process took three hours total, and they had to take a break twice to reapply makeup that had melted off and to let them stretch their legs. The questions stayed simple enough, though, and Yuri answered all of them easily. The only time he really panicked was when Morooka asked him an in-depth question about the quarterly budget report for the country that had been released a few weeks ago and Yuri stumbled over the math, not used to having to calculate such large numbers on the fly, until Seung-Gil chimed in with the correct figures and he was able to pick himself up from there.
All in all, he supposed it could have been worse, his lack of higher level math skills notwithstanding.

They all bolted from the room as soon as they had been released, no one seeming to want to stick around for longer than they needed to. Despite being a bit drained from the whole ordeal, Yuri ended up outside with Chris, Phichit, and, surprisingly, Georgi on his heels.

Following the intense rainstorm they’d had earlier in the week, the skies had stayed resolutely grey and dreary, which meant they had mostly kept inside. Finally, it looked as though the sun was ready to peek out at long last, and Yuri was honestly almost to the point where he would have run outside in the middle of a hurricane if it meant that he could get a breath or two of fresh air.

“That wasn’t so bad.” Phichit was the first to speak once they cleared the threshold and began to wander aimlessly towards the entrance to the main gardens. “I really thought they were going to ask us harder questions, or pit us against each other or something.”

“There’s still time for that later.” Georgi pointed out. “Might be there’s still too many of us to really want to dig that deep.”

“Maybe.” Chris agreed easily enough, but there was enough of an edge to his tone that it caught Yuri’s attention. He looked over his shoulder at the other man who looked right back with a blank expression. “What?”

Yuri shrugged. “You send me strange looks all the time and I never ask you why.”

“You could.” There was still something almost irritated in Chris’ tone, though Yuri was fairly certain the irritation wasn’t exactly directed at him. “I wouldn’t answer you, of course, but you could call me out on it if it bothers you.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” Yuri shrugged again. “It confuses me, but it doesn’t bother me. Why? Does it bother you when the tables are turned and you’re the one that’s getting strange looks?”

“Whew…” They had come to a stop by a set of stone tables and chairs, arranged artfully around some gardenia bushes, the white flowers wilting at the tail end of summer, but still hanging on. Phichit hopped up onto one of the tables and looked back and forth between both Yuri and Chris as though he wasn’t sure what to think. “Alright, children. What’s going on?”
Yuri wrapped his arms around his chest, the air was humid, but there was a soft breeze that brought the chill of the storm front that was still in the process of blowing through. “Nothing. It’s… It’s nothing.”

It was nothing. It was nothing and yet it was something and Yuri knew without even having to look that Phichit was not accepting that explanation at all, but it was the best Yuri had right then. Chris usually didn’t bother him as much as he seemed to bother everyone else, but Yuri had been on edge for days now and he was probably touchier than usual. More prone to reading something into literally nothing than he would be on a normal day.

Not that he wanted to explain that to Phichit either.

“It’s not nothing.” Chris sank down onto the bench closest to him ignoring the looks of surprise they were all sending him. “It also has nothing to do with Yuri, so I’m sorry for snapping at you. I’m just not in the best of moods.”

“No one’s been in the best of moods lately.” Georgi also sat, leaving Yuri to hurry to climb up onto the table next to Phichit in order to avoid being the only one left standing in the middle of their impromptu gathering.

“That’s understandable. There’s been a lot going on.” Phichit sighed heavily. “It’s been stressful.”

“It’s been more than stressful.” Chris leant back on his bench, resting his elbows on the concrete table behind him. “I’m just tired of being left in the dark, is all. I thought… I thought some of the topics we were supposed to discuss today were going to be different, that they were going to actually mean something, but they didn’t and it annoyed me and then I took that annoyance out on the first person I could. Which was totally wrong of me. I am sorry.”

“You’ve already apologized.” Yuri pulled his legs up underneath him, not caring at all about getting his pant legs dirty right then. “And I’ve already forgiven you, but if there’s something you want to talk about… We don’t mind listening.”

“We really don’t.” Phichit’s voice was softer than it usually was, but there was no less force behind his words. “I’m getting a little tired of being kept in the dark, too, if I want to be completely honest.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Georgi frowned. “What do you mean they’re ‘keeping us
“You haven’t noticed?” Chris asked incredulously. “The way no one tells us anything about what’s going on outside the palace walls? The way they’ll bury us in facts and numbers and reports, but none of it is actually applicable to the day to day life back home? They won’t even give us access to a phone to call our families unless there’s some kind of emergency.”

“I assumed that was more to make sure nothing leaked out as opposed to making sure nothing leaked in.” Georgi was quick to admit.

Yuri had his mouth open to agree when something made him pause. He pulled his knees up against his chest and wrapped his arms around them, tucking his chin into the little groove between his kneecaps and stared at the damp grass for a moment before speaking.

“Chris has a point. I… I haven’t noticed it too much, but he’s right. We don’t get magazines other than gossip rags and we definitely don’t receive any newspapers. No television either. If someone doesn’t tell us something directly, we don’t find out about it.” Yuri paused again, wondering if he should go on. Wondering if he should trust the others there with him. Phichit he knew he could and even Chris, but Georgi wasn’t someone he spent a lot of time with and he didn’t know the other man as well as he would have liked. But, then again, he remembered the conversation he’d overheard in the library and all the things Georgi had said. The way he’d jumped to Yuri’s defense even though he hadn’t had to. “I haven’t noticed it because Victor tells me a lot when we talk, but I guess we really are blind to what’s really going on out there for the most part.”

He half expected at least one of them to make another comment about how he spent so much time talking with the prince when no one ever really saw them together, but no one did.

“It’s beyond frustrating.” Chris rubbed his forehead and looked as though he was deep in thought for a moment. Almost like he was doing the same thing Yuri had done a few seconds ago. Trying to decide if he trusted them enough to say whatever it was that he wanted to say. “I had hoped… I had hoped that people would actually want to hear what we might have to say, but they just want the same thing they always want: A distraction. That’s all we are to them.”

“That’s not always a bad thing.” Yuri murmured. When all his words garnered were confused looks his tired again. “All everyone does all day is live in the real world. Whatever problems you were hoping someone would ask us about… Well, those problems are their day to day life. Sometimes it’s not a bad thing to want to take a break from that. To want to turn on the television and hear us talking about our dates or about minor things like education programs or new tax cuts. It’s not like they are the ones living in a bubble.”
“I… I didn’t think about it like that…” Chris was still frowning, now looking more at the ground than anyone else, and Yuri could tell there was still something on his mind. Something that was bothering him more than he was apparently willing to admit.

“What did you think this morning was going to be about?” Phichit asked, his tone far more serious than Yuri was used to hearing it. “Did you really think they were going to talk about sensitive subjects? Shit, Chris, you said it yourself earlier. They taped something that they are promoting as being aired live just in case someone put their foot in their mouth even knowing they weren’t going to get too deeply into serious issues. For someone who always seems to know what’s going to happen before it happens, you sure are acting like a sullen idiot about this.”

“That’s a rather grim way of putting it.” Georgi muttered, though he didn’t dispute anything Phichit had said either.

“I thought someone would at least mention some of the things my father told me when he was here.” Chris shrugged, not quite as agitated as he had been, but still not exactly his usual self.

“What things?” Phichit pressed. “If you want us to understand what you’re trying to say, being vague isn’t the best way to go about it. Either say what you want to say or don’t.”

There was a long silence on the tail end of Phichit’s statement. To Yuri it felt like they were all holding their breaths while they waited, though he wasn’t entirely certain what it was they were waiting for.

Finally, Chris seemed to have made his decision.

“It’s… Things aren’t exactly all sunshine and roses in my district, that’s all.” Chris was clearly choosing his words carefully. It actually felt a lot more like a test than anything else Yuri had experienced so far. As though, if they didn’t pass, Chris would clam up on them again and they would never know what had been bothering him today. “I was hoping to get a chance to talk about it some. That’s all. Let everyone back home know that I haven’t forgotten about them.”

“Have you talked to Victor about it?” Yuri asked. As much as he wanted to know the details of what Chris was talking about, he knew enough the understand he wouldn’t be able to force the issue if the other man was dead set on being intentionally vague about it. “If it’s important enough, he can talk to the media advisors and see about getting something done about it.”
“You really think he would, don’t you?” Chris’ shook his head almost like he couldn’t believe Yuri would have even asked that question. “Maybe he would. You’re right. I haven’t exactly asked.”

“You’re from Hampshire, right?” Georgi was looking directly at Chris intensely. Of course, Yuri had noticed Georgi tended to have an air of intensity around him most times, but he did seem more serious than usual. Chris nodded in response. “They imposed a curfew for most major cities there a few weeks ago, didn’t they? I mean, that’s what my mother said when they were here… She’s in politics and she hears things.”

“It’s ostensibly to keep people safer. The governor says rebel activity around the city centers has been on the rise, but it’s really to stop the frequent protests that have been popping up.” Yuri could tell that Chris was being careful about keeping his expression and his words as neutral as possible. “That can’t be proven, of course, but it does put some citizens at a disadvantage.”

“Like Sevens and Sixes that have to work nightshifts or Fives that rely on entertaining at evening parties.” Yuri filled in the blanks easily enough. He might have been lucky for the past five years, but it hadn’t always been that way and he knew several people back home that would suffer if they needed to be indoors before true dark fell.

“Exactly the kind of thing the media tends to avoid reporting on.” Georgi agree darkly. “Mother said there’s been pressure on some of the other governors to do the same in their districts. The upper castes are scared. Supply lines have been disrupted all over the country… It was only a matter of time before someone tried something. They don’t say anything in the news, but there is no way the king is unaware.”

Again, they all had turned to look at Yuri. This time he didn’t even bother with playing dumb. He knew enough to tell when there were more important things than trying to play off his relationship with Victor as something less serious than it was.

“Victor hasn’t said anything in so many words, at least not to me, but I don’t think they are unaware.” Yuri shifted a bit, grasping his left wrist with his right hand to keep the band of his arms around his shins tight. “We don’t… We don’t ever get quite that deep when we talk.”

“He would talk to you, though. If you brought it up.” Yuri noticed that there was a spark in Chris’ eyes as he spoke. A spark that made Yuri feel more uncomfortable than he ever had in the other man’s presence before. “You might be able to convince him to take it to his father. To do something about it.”

“I’m not going to do that.” Yuri didn’t have to think about his answer at all. “If he brings it up. If he
asks my opinion, I’ll give it to him, but I’m not going to go to him and ask a favor. You are a good man, Chris, and I consider you a friend, but that goes a step too far. Besides, if you don’t know that Victor is fair and would listen to anyone who would come to him with a problem by now, then you haven’t been paying attention and probably don’t deserve a favor.”

Yuri knew he had been harsh, knew he very well could have been distancing himself from one of the few people he counted as a true friend… But, well, that was kind of the point underlying what he’d said. If Chris was a true friend, he wouldn’t hold this against Yuri.

After another long pause that caused Yuri’s anxiety to spike in response, Chris smiled with a hint of his usual warmth present in the gesture.

“Fair enough. Fair enough.” Chris lurched to his feet and ran a hand through his hair. He glanced up at the sky, which was starting to take on a darker hue again, the weak sunlight that had been leaking through the clouds starting to disappear altogether. “We’re about to get rained on.”

As they hurried back inside, with thunder nipping at their heels, they didn’t say anything further, separating in order to get changed and ready for dinner.

For the rest of the day Yuri couldn’t help but feel that he’d been given another test out there in the gardens.

Only time would tell if he had passed it or not.
Determination

Chapter Notes

Wanna know the reason why I still don't know how many chapters this is going to be once it's done? It's because of chapters like this. This monster kept growing and growing and growing until I finally gave up and chopped it in half for the sake of pacing. This chapter is still over 9K even with me breaking it apart. I was on pace for it to be 19K if I didn't break it up some so... That means uploading this chapter is a little late, but since the next is half written hopefully I should be able to get it up in a shorter time period (hopefully).

I also intend to use hopefully tonight and tomorrow to answer comments from the previous chapter. Last week was a sketchy internet week for me and I didn't want to lose comments or have issues with posting. :(

Thank you everyone for your patience and enjoy!

Chapter 20 – Determination

Yuri had never thought about it much, but it was actually a bit of a strange phenomenon how time continued to pass even when he had so much on his mind and not nearly enough of an idea of what to do with it.

As one week turned into the next, no one brought up any of what had happened that Friday afternoon. They all continued on like it had never happened. Phichit was his cheerful self. Chris went back to being smug and completely unflappable. Georgi went back to spending most of his free time with JJ and Seung-Gil as he had before. Yuri was sure he wasn’t the only one still thinking about it, but he took his cues from the rest of them and didn’t say anything either.

It was as though they had all come to a silent agreement that there was nothing more to discuss and the subject would remain closed.

Since no one seemed willing to say anything time went on and things started going back to normal slowly but surely.

First, the Brittanians went home. Or most of them did in any case. King Yakov and Queen Grace had come to an agreement that the long-standing treaty did need to have some revisions, and Chloe had immediately volunteered to stay behind to be the voice for her country instead of them sending a different representative once they had returned home.
It took less time than Yuri had thought it would for Chloe to slip into their group. Her only real job was to attend revision sessions in regards to the treaty between their two countries, so she had more spare time to spend with them than she had before her family had left. But she had been on the edges of the group for some time at that point and it only took a few days for her to find a solid place and settle in for the long haul.

Tangentially related to the other royals returning to their own country, the second step towards returning to normal was Victor spending more time with them in the palace. With the media circus calming from an endless flurry back down to a low buzz, there was no more pressure for Victor to be seen in public with a different Elite every so often. Instead, he went back to inviting them to private lunches or to spend an hour or so with him in the gardens whenever he would get a break from his official duties.

This meant, apparently, that Yuri was able to officially be back on the dating roster.

“Don’t take it personally.” Minako had a way of knowing what Yuri was thinking before he even said something, and she had been able to tell instantly when he had turned up in his room after lunch with a formal invitation to have afternoon tea with Victor in the gardens that something about it was bothering him more so than usual. “You had to know that no one was going to trust letting Victor have time with you alone out in the city again after what happened with the library thing. Now that that’s off the table, you can go back to having actual dates with him. You’re pouting like that’s not something you want.”

“It’s not that I don’t want it…” Yuri trailed off there for a moment. He wasn’t actually sure why he was in a bad mood about this. All he knew was that he was. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m just upset because I was the last one he asked this month?”

It was a poor excuse and he knew Minako wouldn’t accept it even before his saw her pursed lips and furrowed brow in reaction. He was certain Minako didn’t know the details of the secrets meetings he’d been having with the prince, but he did know she wasn’t dumb enough to believe they weren’t finding ways to spend some amount of time together.

“Well, you know how he likes to save the best for last.” Minako replied as she waved a hand gracefully through the air as though dismissing any rebuttal Yuri might think to make before he could have a chance to stick his foot in his mouth again. “Here. You’ll want to bring a sweater. Septembers around here can be awfully finicky when it comes to the weather. Better to…”

“Have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.” Yuri finished her statement for her. It was one of her favorite sayings and Yuri could often see it coming a mile away. “Thank you for looking
“This is the part where I’m supposed to brush you off and say that I’m just doing my job.” Minako smiled brightly as she handed him a meticulously folded blue sweater. “You know that whatever happens, I’m going to look out for you, right?”

Yuri nodded. “I know. I still can’t figure out why, but I appreciate it.”

“I can only hope that one of these days you do some serious thinking and figure out that you deserve all the support we willingly give you.” Minako reached out and gently pat him on the top of his head. “Now, stop wasting time. You wouldn’t want to leave your suitor waiting.”

As much as Yuri wanted to snipe back something about Minako having the roles reversed there, he didn’t. All it would have done would be to earn him another lecture about being more positive about his situation.

No matter what Minako said to the contrary, Yuri still knew the truth. He was the one that was supposed to be courting Victor, not the other way around. He felt like he’d been doing better at it lately, especially once he’d made up his mind that Victor wasn’t not only something he very well could have, but also something he wanted to have as well.

That still didn’t mean there wasn’t room for improvement or that there weren’t others here who were probably a lot better at it and a lot more confident in their own abilities than Yuri was in his own. He might have had Victor’s attention for some time now, but that didn’t mean he was guaranteed to keep it.

As much as he hadn’t wanted to admit it to Minako, Yuri knew that his discomfort at this newest situation was less because he didn’t want to go on a date with Victor and more because he had grown used to seeing him in private. There was a certain ease to their interactions that was present in the parlor on the second floor that Yuri struggled sometimes to replicate when he knew there could or would be other eyes prying into their time together.

Perhaps he was looking at it in the wrong way. Yuri had already stumbled out of his room and had made it about halfway down the hall when he paused. He shouldn’t be viewing it as someone prying into his personal business. What he should be doing was to look at it like… Well, like he was staking a claim. After a little over a month of knowing that Victor would come running to him whenever and however he could, it was time to do something to make sure everyone else knew it, too, and also knew Yuri would do the same if Victor were to call for him.
It was time to show them that Victor was his.

~

Yuri’s burst of confidence had already begun to fade by the time he’d made it down the stairs and through the familiar hallways towards the glass doors that would lead him outside and towards the section of the gardens that had been specified in Victor’s invitation. The ever-present part of him where his anxiety resided kept whispering that it wasn’t too late. He hadn’t done anything, stupid or otherwise, yet and he didn’t have to. He could just let things go on as they had been. There was nothing wrong with that.

Even though there wasn’t anything wrong with it, that didn’t mean such a choice necessarily felt right either and Yuri recognized that he was stewing in indecision again.

Well, that was also normal enough. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d considered making what could be an important decision without a million ‘what ifs’ plaguing him until everything was said and done and it was too late to take it back. So long as he didn’t let the indecision paralyze him, he should be fine.

The weather had cleared up as they moved out of the tail end of summer and into fall and the sun was as bright as it had been before the storms had blown through. Yuri sighed happily and closed his eyes and turned his face towards the sun, allowing its warmth to wash across him and bolster him.

Victor had asked that they meet in the gardens, by the section with all the rose bushes. It was private enough that no one would be able to really see them well from any windows in the palace, but it was still out in the open. If anyone wandered around stretching their legs or wanting a breath of fresh air, it wouldn’t be hard to see them at all.

Sure enough, as he made his way across the lawn he noticed the flash of a camera lens across the way. The camera crews were getting better at hiding themselves, but Yuri was also getting much better at noticing them no matter where they hid.

That was definitely another thing he hadn’t missed when he hadn’t been invited on any official dates.

He hadn’t quite made it all the way to his destination when a loud bark heralded the brown blur of Makkachin as he bounded out of a nearby bush in order to rush to Yuri’s side. Yuri laughed and bent
down to wrap the poodle in his arms, happy to see him as he always was. He received a slobbery
tongue against his cheek and his glasses almost being knocked completely off his face for his efforts.

“Makka! What have you found?” Yuri looked up to find Victor beaming down at him, the prince
failing at holding back his laughter as Makkachin took Yuri’s momentary distraction as a cue to try
and grab his attention back again by butting his head into Yuri’s chest and causing him to fall back
ungracefully on his ass.

“Do you send your dog out to maul all your dates, or am I just special?” Yuri tried to keep his
expression stern, but it was difficult when Makkachin had wriggled into his lap and was trying to lick
the underside of his chin even as Yuri tried to crane his head back far enough that the dog wouldn’t
be able to reach.

“I do try, but he only ever does this to you. I guess that means you’re special.” Victor offered a hand
as Yuri gave Makkachin one last firm scratch behind the ears before he accepted the offer and
allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. “Are you ok…?”

If there was anything else Victor was trying to ask, it was lost when Yuri kept up his forward
momentum and brought their lips together, using his free hand to cup the back of Victor’s head in
order to stop them both from stumbling back.

They pulled apart when Makkachin started trying to nudge his way between their shins, though
Victor didn’t let him get far as he tucked Yuri’s body to his side. Victor leant in close enough to
whisper into Yuri’s ear.

“There are cameras around.” Victor whispered even as he pressed a firm kiss to Yuri’s temple.
“They probably caught every second of that.”

“I know. I saw them.” Yuri admitted, even as he didn’t put any space between them at all. “Why?
Do they bother you? I’m sure if you really wanted you could send them away.”

“No. They’re… They’re fine.” Victor’s grin faltered for the briefest of seconds and Yuri moved his
hand from the nape of the prince’s neck to squeeze the ball of his shoulder, pressing even closer
against Victor’s solid frame as he did so in a sign that he wasn’t about to pull away like he might
have done weeks before. “I thought you didn’t like them.”

“I don’t, but not liking them isn’t going to make them go away, is it?” Yuri tried to force down the
sudden bite of nerves. He hadn’t given much thought to how Victor might react to his gesture. Hadn’t really thought much beyond giving in to his urge to kiss Victor instead of batting it down as he typically did when they weren’t shut away behind the privacy of closed doors. “I’m fine, Victor. I’m just happy to see you, but if you’d rather we keep such things away from the cameras…”

“No! Not at all. Whatever you’re comfortable with, I’m comfortable with.” Any amount of hesitation instantly melted off Victor’s face and was replaced by his wide smile. “Trust me, Yuri, I am never going to pass up any chance to hold you close to me.”

“O-Oh…?” Yuri felt the blood rush to his face despite his best attempt to stop it. He could have kicked himself. His confidence had lasted all of two minutes before he was reduced back down to a stuttering blushing mess. No, he could do this. The only people who mattered here were Victor and himself. “I… I mean, the tea is probably getting cold. Do you think you could let me go long enough to ensure it doesn’t go to waste?”

“I suppose that can be arranged, although I do want you to know that I’m agreeing very reluctantly.” Victor punctuated his statement with another kiss to Yuri’s temple and, even though he moved away enough so that they could move without tripping over each other, he still kept their hands entwined. “Come on. They did set up a nice spread for us. You are right, we wouldn’t want all that hard work to go to waste.”

Yuri nodded and allowed himself to be led down the path and around the bushes, Makkachin trotting happily in front of them.

A wrought iron table had been set up with a cream tablecloth set over it and dishes with pastries, sandwiches, and three different teapots. Two chairs were set up on opposites sides and Yuri frowned when he noticed that detail.

“What’s wrong?” Victor was as quick to notice Yuri’s sudden change of mood and he sounded concerned.

“Nothing that can’t be fixed.” Even though he didn’t want to, he disentangled his hand from Victor’s and marched over to the table, grabbing one of the chairs and moving it so that it was right next to the other, shifting around plates and cups as well. “I’m sorry, but I’m getting a little tired of sitting on opposite ends of the table from you.”

“That does look much better.” Victor moved quickly to take his new spot as Yuri sat in his own chair. They had barely settled before Yuri found his hand back in the prince’s. “I have to admit I’m not exactly fond of the way the seating arrangements have been at meal times. I’ll speak with Mila
“Speak with her again?” Yuri asked as he reached down to pat Makkachin on the head before the dog collapsed in the scant space between their chairs. “Mila’s the one in charge of the seating arrangements?”

“Among other things, yes.” Victor said as he used his free hand to move a plate of croissants closer to them. “I’ve suspected for some time that the way we’re seated at meal times is not exactly as random as it is made to seem. Don’t blame Mila, though. This one is apparently on my Father. To be fair to him, the last time I sat next to you we ended up running away for most of an afternoon. He might have forgiven you for that, but that doesn’t mean he’s willing to let me off the hook. Something about not wanting to encourage any more impulsive decision making from me.”

“Do you really have a habit of making impulsive decisions?” Yuri asked, honestly curious to know. He had to admit their ice cream date had been particularly spur of the moment, but he hadn’t really noticed Victor being particularly spur of the moment, but he hadn’t really noticed Victor being particularly impulsive other than that. For the most part, Victor seemed to weigh his options heavily whenever they had discussed some of the day to day duties he had to attend to.

“My father would say I do.” Victor laughed deeply as though he found the thought intensely amusing. “I have to admit that I could be extremely impulsive when I was younger. Last month wasn’t even the first time I ran off without telling anyone where I was going. One time Chloe and I were at an event in Britannia… I think I was about seventeen which would have made her around fourteen or so… Anyways, that doesn’t matter, but it was winter and she knew there was supposed to be a massive Christmas market a few streets over. We’d already been told there wouldn’t be time to go, but as we were getting ready to get back into the cars to go back to their winter estate, Yurio threw a tantrum about something. He was like eight at the time and it was his first time coming to Britannia with us so their guards weren’t used to him randomly throwing fits. Before any of them could notice us, I grabbed Chloe and we took off. It took them three hours to find us and when they did… Well, let’s just say that the lecture you and I got was nothing compared to that one.”

Victor was still laughing and Yuri giggled even as he shook his head. “That must have been the lecture of the century.”

“Oh, it most certainly was. You already got the highlights. The whole ‘you could have been kidnapped or killed’ thing and the ‘we expected you to be more responsible than this’ thing. Then there was the matter of it almost causing an international incident when a local recognized us as we were ducking into a nearby church in order to avoid some of the search party.” Victor laughed even harder at that, using the hand that wasn’t still firmly wrapped up in Yuri’s to brush away some tears from the corners of his eyes. “They thought I’d stolen the princess away to marry her.”

“Which is utterly ridiculous.” Victor was quick to tack on to the end of his statement, sobering a little
as that last admission had caused both of Yuri’s eyebrows to raise even as he wasn’t able to keep down an undignified snort of laughter. “Which our parents knew, but that still didn’t mean we didn’t have to hear about it for *days* afterwards.”

“Sounds like it was a fun adventure.” There was a stab of something deep in Yuri’s abdomen that he pushed down forcefully, trying not to let the smile on his face waver.

“It was less fun than it could have been. We only had about twenty minutes to enjoy ourselves and the rest of the time was spent running away.” Victor had calmed down a bit by that point. “Of course, the running was its own kind of fun even though we knew the whole time we were going to be caught in the end.”

“Sounds like you and Chloe have had an impressive friendship if she trusted you enough to go with you.” Yuri had said the words before he’d had a chance to think about them and he wanted to take them back the moment they had left his lips. Apparently, he wasn’t as good at quieting his stupid jealousy as he thought he was. Not that he’d had much practice with it. Before Victor he’d never had anyone he cared enough to be jealous about. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean for it to sound like…”

“Yuri…” Victor didn’t look upset at all. In fact, he was still smiling, his expression softer than it had been before and he leaned in so close that Yuri could feel the warmth of his body all along his right side. “Chloe is like a little sister to me. Always has been. Even if for some reason it wasn’t that way, it would be purely one-sided. She’s been very firmly interested in girls ever since puberty. I never would have stood a chance… Not that I wasn’t in much the same position. Even though I’m not completely dead to women, men have always been a bit better at catching my eye.”

“I know.” Yuri actually hadn’t known, but, for what it was worth, he did now. Not that it made him feel any better about being suspicious in the first place. Victor didn’t seem overly upset about it and Yuri was determined to move past it quickly. “As much as I don’t want to, I am going to need my hand back if you want me to be able to enjoy any of this spread you’ve had set out for us.”

“You should know better by now than to think that is a course of action I would ever endorse.” Victor grinned as he reached out and grabbed a bowl of blueberries, taking one from within in and holding it out between them. “We could always take turns helping each other eat.”

“That doesn’t seem particularly practical.” Yuri teased, even as he allowed Victor to pop the blueberry into his open mouth.

“It’s not.” Victor agreed amicably as he reached out to pick up another berry. “I can’t say I care much, especially since it would take longer to finish our tea than it would otherwise. That way I have
“Speaking of the tea, who is going to pour it if we only have one hand each?” Yuri accepted the berry Victor offered him again. He reached out to tear off a corner of one of the croissants, not able to be particularly graceful about it with only one hand, but he managed. Victor’s eyes lit up as he allowed Yuri to place the piece in his mouth. “You didn’t think that part through either… Hmmm… I guess you really are prone to making impulsive decisions.”

“I’ll have you know I did think about the consequences of refusing to let you go. I weighed all my options and I determined that I was willing to sacrifice drinking the tea in order to hold onto you.” Victor picked up Yuri’s hand and kissed his knuckles gently. “See? A perfectly well-thought out decision.”

“I see your point.” Yuri glanced down at where Makkachin was lying flat on his stomach between their chairs still. “What about a compromise?”

It took them about two minutes longer than Yuri thought it would to maneuver their chairs so they were pushed together with Makkachin lying lengthwise beneath them. Mostly because Victor decided that standing meant he could wrap his arms around Yuri’s waist from behind and refused to do more than lean against his back while Yuri tried to get the poodle to move to where he needed to be and get the chairs set up so they would be side to side and close enough that they should be able to keep contact while still giving them the use of both of their hands.

“Is you hanging off me while I do this 100 percent necessary?” Yuri asked, though he didn’t try to move away at all.

“It’s absolutely vital.” Victor murmured back, his face buried in the crook of Yuri’s neck in a way that made a shiver pass through him that had nothing to do with the chilly breeze that had started blowing. “You wanted a compromise. These were my terms.”

It was a little bit easier to enjoy their snacks and tea once everything was settled. Even if Victor pouted for a bit and tried to surreptitiously grab his hand back once or twice before giving up.

Their conversation stayed light at first. Yuri focused more on spending time with Victor without having to keep an eye on the clock or an ear out for servants or others who might have been approaching than on delving into any serious topics.
Eventually Yuri’s curiosity won out over his desire for idle chatter. Ever since the first time he’d gotten together enough courage to ask Victor to go into more details about his day and whatever it was the went on behind those closed door meetings, it had become almost impossible not to ask whenever they were alone. There was something about being able to be a sounding board for Victor to vent anything he wanted to get off his chest that made Yuri happier than he was sure it should.

Even though it was a small gesture in the grand scheme of things, Yuri liked being able to be someone he hoped Victor could rely on.

“How were your meetings this morning?” They had moved on from tasting the first tea, a standard green tea, to the second, which was something herbal that tasted a lot like raspberries, when Yuri asked the question.

“They went well. Two of Father’s more longwinded financial advisors caused our first meeting to run over so we had to push our session with Chloe to go over the latest proposals she received from her mother to tomorrow afternoon, but she didn’t seem too terribly upset about it. I think she’s having more fun hanging out with all of you than being locked away in dour business meetings. Our other appointment…” Victor sipped his tea for a moment. Almost as though he was weighing whether he should say what he had been about to say or not. Yuri waited patiently. It wouldn’t have been the first time Victor hadn’t been able to tell him something due to the fact the Yuri didn’t actually have any proper clearance to know state secrets. He didn’t always like it, but he did understand, so he waited while Victor made up his mind whether or not the other meeting he’d had was something he was able to share.

“Our other appointment had a satisfying conclusion.” For a second, Yuri was sure that Victor’s statement was going to be the end of it and he prepared himself to forge on to another topic. Before he could think of something new to say, Victor continued. “Seung-Gil has received some good news from home. He… He had a childhood friend, the son of a man who used to be an ambassador for New Asia. He’s apparently been seeking asylum here for some time now. Father approved it a week ago and we received word today that his friend has arrived in Illéa safely… I suspect he’ll probably be going home in the next few days as a result.”

“Oh… He… He never said anything about that to any of us.” Yuri was getting better at choosing his words and knowing what to say in certain situations, but sometimes he still found himself stumbling and fumbling for something to say to fill the silence.

“I got the feeling he hadn’t.” Victor sounded serious and Yuri sat up straighter in his seat. “I don’t know what the situation was exactly, he only asked me to arrange a meeting with my father and I only bothered to ask him for enough details to know that his request had merit before I asked Father to grant him an audience. I am not the king yet so my power only extends so far…”
“You didn’t have to do anything at all.” Yuri pointed out. “You didn’t have to get him an audience with the king. You… Well, you could have done anything. You could have sent him home.”

“I could have.” Victor admitted easily. “I wouldn’t have, though. I wouldn’t punish any of you for having things that are important to you. You’re all such different people with such different backgrounds. I’m sure there are favors you could ask me if you wanted, and, if they had as much merit as Seung-Gil’s request, I wouldn’t dismiss them, or you, either.”

Yuri wanted badly to ask him if it bothered him at all that, now that Seung-Gil had gotten what he wanted, he was ready to go back home without a second thought. He wanted to, but he didn’t. It wasn’t his business.

Victor, however, knew Yuri far better than Yuri often gave him credit for, and he answered the question Yuri hadn’t been able to ask.

“Seung-Gil is an honorable man, and a very intelligent one at that. I do believe he came here with the same hope as everyone else. To see if we could be compatible.” Victor drummed his fingers against the table. “We’ve known for quite some time that we weren’t. I suspect he’s been trying to gauge if it was worth approaching me with his request before requesting to go home anyways.”

“He is a good person, and he’s been a good friend, even if he keeps to himself for the most part.” Yuri wasn’t lying either. He might not have spent a ton of time with the other man, but he had always been willing to help Yuri and some of the others in their lessons wherever and whenever he could. His comprehension of some of the more complicated figure and calculations Celestino sometimes set them was invaluable for those who didn’t have a strong foundation in mathematics and Yuri, Phichit, Leo, and even sometimes JJ had benefited from Seung-Gil’s help. “You’re right, too. We all have things we could ask you if we wanted to. Some of us might and some of us might not, but if you thought his request was something that needed looking into… Then it can’t have all been bad.”

“I agree.” Victor took back Yuri’s hand and this time Yuri let him. He was suddenly not in the mood for drinking tea anymore anyway. “It’s not the fact that he asked a favor that bothers me. I don’t mind it when people come to me for favors. What worries me is what this means for our relations with New Asia. We’ve been teetering on the brink of a war no one but them wants to fight for years now. It’s… It’s not something I think I’m really allowed to be telling you.”

“I understand.” Yuri didn’t have to remind Victor that he wouldn’t tell a soul anything they discussed if Victor asked him not to. Victor already knew that. “Whatever does happen, you aren’t going to have to deal with it alone. You’ll have your father and your advisors… You’ll have me.”
Victor pulled him close then and hugged Yuri to his chest, resting his chin in Yuri’s hair as he allowed himself to be held.

“I know, I will. I know.”

Victor had been right. Within two days, Seung-Gil had announced that he was removing himself from the Selection in order to go home and assist his friend with settling in to his new country. They had a small gathering after breakfast on the day he was to leave to see him off and the mood in the palace was melancholy as soon as he’d left.

They were down to eight and that number was only going to continue to grow smaller and smaller.

At first, others going home didn’t make much of an impact on Yuri other than to stroke his anxiety for his own sake, or to cause him to panic about the Selection eventually having to come to an end whether he was ready to make a decision or not. He’d barely had time to get to know them, and some of the first to go were ones who had actively stayed away from Yuri in the first place for whatever reason.

Now… Well, now the people that were going home were his friends. He’d spent more time with them than he did with Victor on the average day and they had become a calming presence in his life. The day was rapidly approaching when more of them were going to leave to go back to their old lives. Emil was spending more and more time writing letters home. Leo had always been a fair bit homesick and he had begun to tell them all more and more stories that revolved around the friends and family he’d left behind. Yuri wouldn’t have been surprised if they were the next to ask to leave once they realized Victor would honor their requests should they think to ask.

Lunch was a solemn affair for all of them. Not even getting the chance to finally sit next to Victor was able to really draw Yuri out of his funk, though the way Victor had looped an ankle around his own under the table did help to ground him some.

“We should take the afternoon off. All of us.” Chloe announced as lunch started to draw to a close and servants cleared the table. “It looks like we’re all in dire need of cheering up.”

“Father…” Victor immediately turned to look up at the High Table behind him.
“No.” King Yakov didn’t even let him get any further. “You’ve been putting off meeting with the media advisors all week. You’re not putting them off again. You can go back to your suitors after that has been done and not a second sooner.”

“Maybe if they weren’t so dull, I wouldn’t feel like always putting them off.” Victor grumbled under his breath so only Yuri could hear. Yuri shook his head and hid a smile under the guise of wiping his lips with his napkin. With a dramatic sigh, Victor turned back to his father. “Fine, but if they try to stray from the set agenda even once, I’m out of there.”

“Victor can join us later.” Chloe had risen to her feet and some of those on either side of her had stood up as well. “Come on. We’ve had nice weather lately. I’m sure we can find something to do outside. Maybe stretch our legs a little.”

“I’ve got a better idea!” Phichit chirped happily. “Yuri was giving us all dance lessons before the ball. I kind of miss those…”

“Me, too!” Guang Hong had hopped up to his feet and colored as soon as he noticed everyone was looking at him. “Um… I mean… I enjoyed the lessons as well. They were fun.”

“What do you think Yuri? You up for teaching us some new tricks?” Chris had been sitting to Yuri’s left with Georgi between them and the taller man shot him a lopsided grin from over the top of Georgi’s head.

“Oh… No, I don’t mind. It was fun.” And Yuri didn’t mind. The lessons had been fun and he had been thinking about trying to find some time to dance that afternoon anyway. “We’ll have to go change first…”

“Father!” Victor twisted in his seat so fast it gave Yuri second-hand whiplash and gave Yakov the biggest set of puppy dog eyes Yuri had ever seen. “Please! I swear I’ll meet with them however long you want me to tomorrow. Let me have the afternoon off today and I’ll never ask you for anything ever again.”

“I already said ‘no’, Victor.” The king’s tone was firm and left no room for further argument. “Next time attend to your duties when they are originally supposed to be attended to, and we won’t have this problem in the future.”

“Don’t worry, Victor.” Yuri placed a hand on the prince’s shoulder, which caused Victor to turn his
puppy dog eyes on Yuri next. “We’ll be at the studio for hours. There’s not enough space for everyone to dance at once so you’ll have plenty of time while we all take turns.”

“Okay. Okay… I’ll be quick. Don’t stop before I can get there.” With that Victor had shot to his feet and leant over and placed a chaste kiss on Yuri’s cheek before turning on his heel and striding out of the room without looking back.

Yuri was left behind, frozen in place, his face on fire, all eyes in the room on him. The worst part of it was that he couldn’t even bring himself to be upset with Victor. It was painfully obvious that, in his excitement and haste to get his meeting over and done with, he had done it without thinking.

“Damn it, I wish I had a camera right now. Yuri, your face is priceless.” Phichit broke the awkward silence with a peal of laughter and a slap on the back to the person standing next to him, which, in this case, was Chris.

Chris, who was also quick to laugh as well, shook his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Phichit’s right. That’s probably the funniest expression I’ve ever seen. You look like you’re about to have a heart attack.”

“I think he looks like a fucking idiot.” Yurio groused as he rose to his feet and shoved his chair back into position with more force than really necessary. “I thought we had plans to be somewhere. Laugh and walk. We don’t have all afternoon.”

They did. Yuri stumbled to his feet as everyone else moved to leave, laughing and talking amongst themselves instead of looking at him any longer. He fell into step with Phichit and Chris, the former of which nudged him gently on the shoulder, but didn’t say anything further, choosing to start a conversation with Chris over Yuri’s head about a group of them that were going to go downstairs after dinner to watch a movie in the theater and if he wanted to join or had an opinion about what they should watch if he did.

It helped to keep Yuri calm and he made a mental note to thank both of them for it later.

For now, he needed to get through the rest of the afternoon and then he could carve out some time to think about what had happened just moments before. To sort through his feelings and find out exactly what he thought of Victor’s apparently instinctual urge to do something like that even with all his other suitors watching. Decide whether he was happy about it or not and what, if anything, he was going to do about it when he saw Victor in private again.
Although, he was pretty sure the pounding of his heart was less from nerves now and more from something he didn’t think he even could explain.

It felt deeper than happiness.

It felt like pride.

~

Chloe had been right. An afternoon of playing around was exactly what they had all needed and it wasn’t long at all before they were all laughing and joking with each other in a way that made Yuri glad that he’d been able to have a hand in raising everyone’s mood.

Everyone was much better at ballroom dancing than they had been before, but there were still a few who struggled with the more complicated movements or were tripped up when it came to dips and spins. Yuri hovered around the room while some of those who didn’t have a lot of experience paired up with those who did and Yuri gave corrections where he saw them and encouragement when it looked like someone needed it.

“You’re good at this. The teaching thing, I mean.” Emil had stepped over to the side to grab a drink and catch his breath at the same time Yuri had. “Well, and the dancing thing, I guess, but I’m pretty sure we already knew that.”

“Really?” Yuri hadn’t given much thought to whether he actually was a good teacher, but now that he thought about it, just because he was good at something didn’t necessarily mean he knew how to convey that knowledge to others in a way they could understand or actually use. “Um… Thank you. I’m just happy to help if I can.”

“You are definitely doing that.” Emil grabbed a towel from off a nearby cabinet and wiped his face and the back of his neck with it. “You’ve studied other kinds of dance than just ballroom, right?”

“Yes. Mostly ballet, but I’ve dabbled in others when I’ve gotten the chance.” Yuri grinned. “You can never be too well-rounded where dance is concerned. We would always get a guest director or choreographer that would come through and want to blend flamenco with ballet for some absurd reason, so it paid to be ready for just that eventuality.”
“Did that happen often?” Emil asked even as he laughed.

“Often enough that I felt the urge to sign up for any classes that became available, even if they weren’t even tangentially related to ballet.” Yuri explained. “It’s a lot easier for the director to find you a role when they know you can go any direction the production might take. Not to mention, it was interesting. I love ballet, but it can get monotonous sometimes if you don’t have anything to break away from it every once in a while.”

“Sounds like you put in a lot of hard work.” Emil sounded impressed. “Did you ever think about teaching when you retired from performing? I wasn’t kidding. If you can whip the lot of us into shape, you’d be the perfect instructor for others.”

“Oh, um, no, not really.” Out of all the options Yuri had been considering before and even after his injury, he hadn’t thought about becoming an instructor even once. After all, most studios he been at had long-standing instructors and were not looking for any extra help. There weren’t a lot of directions a retired dancer could go and those who had found instructor positions weren’t going to give them up until the day of their own funerals. “I was actually toying with possibly doing some of my own choreography… Ah, that was before my injury, of course.”

“Really!?” Yuri jumped about a foot in the air when Phichit screeched from right behind them. He hadn’t even heard the other man approach, too caught up in his conversation with Emil to pay much attention to what the rest of the room was doing. “Did you actually put something together? If you did can we see it? Please? I’ll bet it’s amazing!”

“W-what?” Yuri almost dropped the water bottle he was holding. “I… Um… There were a few things I was… Honestly, nothing is completed. They’re all a mess. You wouldn’t want to see any of them.”

“I beg to differ.” Chris, and the rest of the room, had perked up at Phichit’s yelling. “If you don’t want to show some of your original stuff, maybe show us something old. An old role you played or something like that. While you do dance a fantastic waltz, I get the feeling it does not do you all the justice you deserve.”

“I wouldn’t want to bore you with something like that.” Yuri pushed down the beginnings of a mild panic. “You didn’t come here to watch me. You came here to practice for yourselves.”

“We wouldn’t mind taking a break.” Chloe picked up the ball and ran with it and Yuri winced as she went on in her typical cheerful fashion. “Surely there’s something you’ve got stored away that you can show us. If I were to admit to missing something from home, it would be the opportunity to
watch our own Royal Ballet company perform. Mother and I really enjoy their performances. It would be almost like having a piece of home here to get the chance to watch some proper ballet.”

“Show us what you’ve got.” JJ was leaning against the barre and he shot an amused glance in Yuri’s direction. “I can’t say I’ve ever had a chance to go to the ballet for myself. Go on. Show us what we’re missing.”

If there was one thing Yuri hated more than anything, it was backing down from a challenge. He also knew when to recognize a lost cause when he saw one. If he didn’t accept JJ’s challenge he was more than certain someone else would take up the cause and his resolve would have been worn away eventually.

“Fine.” He tossed the water bottle towards his duffle and moved over to where his music player was plugged into the sound system, still playing a steady rotation of classical music under the sounds of their conversation. “Can I have a few minutes to figure out which piece to use?”

“Of course, of course.” Chloe clapped as everyone else lurched into motion, clearing away their things and moving to give him as much space as they could as they chattered amongst themselves.

Yuri busied himself with looking through his playlist. It would be easy to pick a piece he’d danced professionally to. He’d repeated every single role he’d ever danced so often he was sure he could do them all in his sleep. The only problem with that was his inclination to taking roles that were meant to be duets or danced in a corps. It wouldn’t be too hard to cut away the need for another dancer, but that would have left many of those pieces lacking complexity and depth in Yuri’s opinion and he didn’t want to do that either. He always had been too dedicated to his craft than was generally considered healthy for him and he never had liked to take the easy way out.

That left the scant few original pieces he had been working on for the past few months. He had about four he had been playing around with, but only two were anywhere close to being performance ready. One was the piece he’d been working on before his injury. The other was the one he had started that day not too long ago when he’d returned from seeing his family off at the airport.

The first piece was fiercer and more complex in a way, but he still struggled with some of the movements and the story he was trying to convey through it. He’d made it with another dancer in mind, after all, and her style was the polar opposite from his own. In the beginning, he’d thought of it as a fun challenge, now it frustrated him more often than it excited him.

The second piece, though… The second piece was definitely truer to himself, but it also left him feeling more open and vulnerable when he danced it. Dancing bits and pieces of it to refine the
choreography was fine, but any time he danced it all the way through he ended up feeling like his very soul had been scraped raw. Friends or not, he was very sure he didn’t want them to see him in any way that would be construed as weak.

Neither was a great option and he dithered there flipping between the two titles and chewing on the inside of his cheek as he tried to make a final decision.

In the end, he queued up the track for the first piece. No one present would have any way to know what the piece had originally been intended to convey. So long as he focused on the technical aspects of it, it should impress them well enough.

“Okay.” He turned back to where the others had already taken up spots along the windowed side of the studio, either sitting or standing against them in order to free up as much space in the middle of the room as possible. “It’s still a bit rough, but I started working on this before I left the ballet. I kind of had one of my friends in mind when I was putting it together and I still don’t know if I want it to be a solo or a duet yet, but it’s better than the rest of my stuff so, you know… Forgive me if it’s a little disjointed in some spots.”

“Whatever it is, it’s definitely going to be better than anything any one of us could put together.” Leo pointed out and Yuri let the sentiment bolster his flagging courage at least a little. “I get that that’s not saying much but…”

Yuri mumbled something about them being better than they thought they were as he raised his arms over his head and stretched a little. He was probably more than loose enough from practicing and stretching before, but he felt the urge to stall none the less.

It had been months since the last time he’d been on a stage. Not since the beginning of February when he’d come down funny on his knee in practice and everything had been shot straight to hell from there. It had probably been even longer than that since he’d been on stage alone, too. Yuri actually wasn’t exactly sure the last time that had happened. Maybe a few years ago when the flu had swept through the company and had rendered most of the principal soloists immobile for a few days that winter and Yuri had been one of the few with the right skillset and the ability to stand upright for longer than five minutes without feeling the need to empty his stomach into the nearest receptacle.

In any case, even though this wasn’t exactly a stage and those gathered weren’t exactly strangers who paid to see him put on a performance, there was the familiar dance of nerves in the pit of his stomach none the less.

He never had liked dancing alone.
Yuri lowered his arms and moved back to the player. Stalling wasn’t going to do anything other than work him up in to a panic and that was far worse than just dancing. At least, that’s what he told himself as he went to press the ‘play’ button for the selected track.

All of his performance tracks were set with about ten seconds of silence at the beginning so that when he was practicing alone he would have plenty of time to move away from the player and into his starting position before the music could begin to actually play. He took advantage of the delay to shoot a quick glance out at his impromptu audience, and he froze in place as he noticed another form had slipped in through the door when he must have had his back turned.

Victor was there, muttering something under his breath to Yurio who had taken the spot right by the door. Yuri didn’t have a lot of time to register exactly what was going on before Victor looked up and they made eye contact.

It felt like an entire jolt of electricity rushed through him in that moment when their gazes connected. It flashed through him with enough force that it almost made him dizzy.

Dimly he was aware the music was about to kick to life. He didn’t have time to overthink anything. Earlier that week he’d promised himself that he was going to be clear about what he wanted. In that moment, the one thing he wanted the most in the world was to dance for Victor. It almost surprised him exactly how badly he wanted it and, if the way Victor was looking at him, he’d have to say Victor wanted to see him dance just as much.

For the first time in his entire life, Yuri wished he could dance alone… And for an audience of one.

It was too late for that. His body reacted instinctively as the first strains of the guitar filled the room his arms flowed into the first movements of the dance. It might have been too late for him to send everyone else away, but it wasn’t too late to let Victor know that there was only one person he truly wanted to dance for.

He turned away, following his own choreography for the moment. He twisted his torso and exaggerated the movements of his arms. He felt it as power coiled in his thighs and calves, ready to be released in order for him to jump into the complicated steps and turns of the opening portion of his dance. Yuri tightened his core and let out a low breath as he centered himself.

This was the part where he was supposed to move straight into the next sequence. He was supposed to push forward and spin away from where he had been looking before without looking back, but…
Well, this was his own choreography. There wasn’t an instructor or director there to frown if he made a change or added some steps. No one here would even know the difference. It would be tight, but there were just enough beats between his opening movements and the spins and turns that followed to squeeze something in where there hadn’t been anything before…

Instead of following the sound of the guitar strings straight ahead and into the dance, Yuri twisted his torso back towards where he had last seen Victor, hoping the man would still be standing in roughly the same spot. If not, this was going end up with Yuri focused on a blank wall or, much worse, the wrong person.

Luckily either Victor hadn’t moved or Yuri was better at zeroing in on his presence in a split second than he was giving himself credit for, because Yuri ended up looking him dead in the eye before sending the prince what he hoped he was best ‘this is for you’ face.

Then he pulled himself away and threw his body into the dance without a second thought.

He never had been able to make up his mind as to whether this particular routine should be a solo or a duet. He could always see it too clearly as both which made his decision almost impossible to make.

Today everything felt different. A small part of him knew exactly why, but he resolutely ignored it. He didn’t have the time to acknowledge it in the middle of a performance. Not unless he wanted to trip over his own two feet, at least.

Regardless of the true reason, everything flowed better than it ever had before. Instead of the small hesitation where Yuri hadn’t been sure if he wanted to mark a partner’s entrance, there was nothing but solid confidence. There would not be a phantom partner to cut in and join him. He would keep them at arm’s length. If someone wanted to turn his solo into a duet, they were going to have to catch him first.

And there was only one person he wanted to do the catching.
Discoveries

Chapter Notes

This chapter was written in basically two long bursts when I ended up waiting out two different summer showers at the barn. Mostly because I was too lazy to run my horse back out to the pasture through the storm so I popped her in an empty stall and she proceeded to help me write this by hanging over my shoulder in the hopes that I would eventually press some combination of keys that would make my laptop dispense treats before turning her butt to me and sulking into her hay.

With that being said, internet is still out around my parts. I hope it'll be fixed this week so I've stopped by a Starbucks to get this uploaded really quickly.

Also, there has been a tag up there for ages for 'mild sexual content'. This would be the chapter were that comes into play. I'm... Um... Not great at that kind of content so when I say 'mild' it's not an understatement. If it's bad or awkward let's blame the real Monroe. She was distracting me with her treat begging... ^_^;

Sorry again for the delays and my abysmal ability to respond to comments right now! Once we get our web connection back I'm going to have a lot of catching up to do!

Chapter 21 – Discoveries

The rest of the day had been strange. After he’d finished his dance the small space had erupted into applause. Half of those gathered had jumped all over him, shouting different things so loud it was hard for him to tell what any of them were saying, particularly when Phichit had managed to grab him first and was yelling his comments directly into Yuri’s left ear.

By the time he’d managed to disentangle himself from the last of them, Guang Hong had been surprisingly more difficult to detach than even Phichit for some reason, the room had calmed some and he’d been hit with fifty questions from all sides. He’d answered them patiently, far more patiently than he’d felt.

Especially when all he’d wanted to do was run over to Victor in order to his get his opinion.

For the prince’s part, he looked just as thrilled as the others had for the most part, but there was something just ever so slightly off about him. Something Yuri was sure he wouldn’t have been able to notice if he hadn’t known Victor so well. Overall, he was as enthusiastic as he always was when something had pleased him, all smiles and wild gestures and rapid-fire speech, but there was something reflected in his eyes when he would look at Yuri…
Something he didn’t know how to characterize because he’d never seen it before.

At least, not on Victor.

It had followed them through the brief time they, and everyone else, laughed and played around in the dance studio for a bit longer before they had all needed to go back to their rooms to prepare for dinner. It followed them into dinner as well. They weren’t exactly across from each other, more catty-corner, but Victor still managed to catch his eye whenever he could and that something was still there.

Yuri itched to ask him about it. Itched to be alone with the other man so they could say whatever they wanted. He had a feeling he knew exactly what was happening. He often did, but if there was anything he was better at than even dancing, it was avoiding understanding the obvious.

So, he suffered through dinner, trying to ignore the looks Victor would throw him when no one was looking. If he acknowledged them, it would have only led to him doing something embarrassing. What that thing was, he wasn’t sure, but he did know it wouldn’t be good. He never had been the best at reacting instinctively. Particularly not in front of an audience.

When it was time for the servants to start picking up their used dishes and clear away the tables, Yuri found himself holding his breath. He desperately wanted to tap his index finger against the table, to call out to Victor and set up for them to meet, but he didn’t. Every time he tried, he felt a rush of something that left him dizzy and he wasn’t able to do it.

Victor didn’t give the signal either.

In the end, Yuri drug himself back up to his room with his friends on his heels. He wasn’t exactly in the mood for entertaining, but he couldn’t think of a good excuse to send them away and he also didn’t necessarily want to be alone either.

“I still can’t believe you had that in you, Yuri.” Chris had grabbed Yuri’s desk chair as soon as they had followed Yuri back to his room and had turned it to face towards the center of the room. He lounged in it with his legs crossed and his usual charming smirk turned towards where Yuri was sprawled out on the floor between his desk and bed as he ran through his evening stretches. “Where have you been hiding it all this time?”
“I don’t have any idea what you mean.” Yuri stated blandly into the carpet as he stretched forward from his splits position, not quite able to get those last few centimeters he wanted without his right leg trembling some. “I’ve never hidden the fact that I’m a dancer. If you didn’t believe I was good at it before today that sounds like your problem, not mine.”

“Ah, I think you and I both know I am not referring to just the dancing, my dear.” Chris was practically purring. Almost like a cat that had gotten the cream or whatever else it had wanted, though Yuri wasn’t entirely sure why he of all people seemed to be getting the most delight out of the situation. “If you move like that all the time, you’re bound to get more than just a little peck on the cheek from Victor in the future.”

“No comment.” Yuri grumbled as he ground his forehead into the carpet in an effort to ward off the headache that had popped up the second Chris had opened his mouth.

“What I can’t believe is that we never asked you to do that sooner.” Phichit complained from his spot flopped across the head of Yuri’s bed. “You’ve been holding out on us, spending all that time in the studio alone. Now I wish we had been able to see you when you were still with the National Ballet. You must have had to turn down roles right and left.”

“Ah, well, that is…” Yuri pulled up out of his stretch, still leaving his legs where they were as he scratched the back of his neck nervously. Yuri wasn’t sure if Phichit had directed the conversation to a safer track on purpose or not, but he mentally thanked the other man none the less on the off chance he had. “I didn’t have to turn down too much. Most of my roles were duets and scattered throughout the different productions we had on rotation. Since I never really had to dance most productions the whole way through I was able to take a lot more pieces than some of the others who had more principle roles. It kept me pretty busy.”

“What a tragedy. A true tragedy.” Chris sighed dramatically. “To think they were hiding you behind other dancers.”

“They weren’t hiding me.” Yuri scoffed. “There is nothing wrong with wanting to support my company in way other than standing front and center… And I danced solos, too. When there wasn’t anyone else to fill the spot. I just preferred to be able to have many roles instead of only one.”

“Wow…” Guang Hong’s voice was as soft as it always was, but there was enough of a silence after Yuri had stopped speaking that he was easily heard. “That’s… That’s actually more impressive than just being a leading role.”

“No, not really. It was nothing…”
“No, Guang Hong is right.” Both Leo and Guang Hong were on the floor, though they were both sitting with their backs against Yuri’s bed, giving him a wide berth while he stretched, and Leo shoved his friend’s shoulder with his own when he’d instantly jumped to take his side. “You were learning and practicing several roles at one time when it sounds like the others only had one or two that were probably the same style all the way through. Plus, finding time to come up with your own choreography? Did you even sleep?”

“Oh! And don’t forget that he said he could still step in for one of the soloists if they went down.” Phichit piped in. “Forget sleeping, how did you have time for anything but dancing?”

“That’s an easy question.” Chris answered before Yuri could come up with a response.

“Is it really?” Yuri arched an eyebrow as he looked at the other man, more curious to see what he had to say than irritated that someone was trying to answer for him.

“Of course, it is.” Chris grinned in a way that made Yuri suddenly rethinking wanting to hear his answer. “It’s actually very simple.”

“When you love something enough, hard work and time don’t seem like much of anything at all.”

~

The conversation only stayed awkward for a few beats before Phichit was able to get them back on track and they spent most of the evening avoiding any further discussion of Yuri’s dance exhibition. Not that it was for lack of trying on any of his friend’s part, but Yuri was nothing if not the master of deflection and, after they got absolutely nowhere a few times, the others let the subject go.

Every so often he would catch himself looking out the door they had left open and down the hall. Sometimes someone would be coming or going, flitting from one room to the next. Attendants or maids. At one point he noticed JJ, Georgi, and Emil wandering to their own rooms to wind down for bed.

But never the person Yuri really wanted to see.
The hours drug on and it got late enough that his friends finally excused themselves to go to bed, all of them yawning and looking like they were about to fall asleep on their feet as Yuri dismissed Minako before she could even poke her head into the room and ask if he wanted assistance getting ready for bed.

Yuri knew he should be tired. It had been a long day and he’d been fairly active between the dancing lessons and his own performance. There was still an annoying twinge in his knee that wouldn’t go away even though he’d been playing it safe and wearing his brace whenever he exercised again and he knew he should rest it as much as he could. He rightfully should shower and be unconscious before his head even hit the pillow.

He did shower, feeling too restless to really enjoy a soak in the tub and hoping the hot water would somehow relax his tense muscles. It worked, too. Mostly.

His muscles felt better, less tight and painful and closer to normal, but it hadn’t done anything for the buzz of nervous energy that was still coursing through his body.

He could go to bed. Scratch that, he should go to bed. A quick glance at the watch he’d left on his bedside table told him it was going on midnight. If he didn’t sleep soon he was going to look like the walking dead in the morning. He’d been so good lately about keeping his night owl tendencies in check and trying to get on a more normal sleep schedule, but he knew the only thing waiting for him if he were to lie down right then was tossing and turning and getting nothing accomplished.

Not that pacing his room was getting anything accomplished either, but it felt somehow more productive than staring at the ceiling while he tried to bargain with himself for a sliver of sleep.

There were only so many times he could walk the same paths before he started feeling trapped, though. He needed something… No, he needed to go somewhere. That was it. He just needed a change of scenery and then he’d feel better and, once exhaustion was able to fall over him properly, he could go back to his room and settle down for the night.

Usually when he felt like this, he would find an empty space to dance, but that wasn’t an option. There would be guards stationed by any exits and, even though Victor had given them all blanket permission to go outside if they needed to at any time, he rarely ever used that permission. Even just stepping outside for fresh air would have meant a guard shadowing his every step and one would undoubtedly follow him to the studio, most likely waiting outside, but that still wouldn’t be the same. He’d be tense the entire time knowing someone was out there waiting for him. It would only make matters worse.
The roof still left a sour taste in his mouth after the leaked photos and the third floor was still off limits, not that he particularly wanted to be seen roaming around halfway to a nervous wreck by any member of the Royal Family even if it had been open to him. The first floor would have too many people about. He’d learned the hard way that there was a lot of afterhours scurrying around on the ground floor when the royals and their guests were asleep. Preparations for the day they would have ahead of them.

Still not sure where he was going to go or what he was going to do once he got there, Yuri slipped his bare feet into his trainers, not even bothering to tie the laces as he shuffled out of his room and into the dimly lit corridor. He tiptoed past the closed guest room doors, more of them empty now that so many had left.

He still didn’t know where to go, but he let his feet guide him even as he kept his mind purposefully blank. The less he thought about anything, the better he would feel, he was sure.

He’d had enough practice at ignoring things that made him uncomfortable that he was almost able to convince himself that it was true.

By the time he managed to blink his way out of his fugue state, Yuri found himself standing in front of the door that led to the parlor on the far corner of the second floor. He couldn’t even really remember how he’d gotten there or making a conscious decision that it would be his final destination, but he was there now, and there was no point sneaking back through the dark halls to stew in silence in his own room. Maybe the change of location would do him well.

The room was dark and empty when he walked through the door and closed it quietly behind him. As he flipped on the lights Yuri frowned. He felt disappointed when he realized there really and truly wasn’t anyone in the room even though he knew there wouldn’t have been. He hadn’t brought his watch with him, but it had been a little past midnight when he’d left his room and it wasn’t getting any earlier. Anyone of import was mostly likely asleep.

Victor was most likely asleep.

That was probably just as well. Yuri knew himself well enough to know that he was in one of his stranger moods. He would only end up saying something he would regret later on if he were to see Victor right then.

Yes, it was for the best.
Yuri slipped his shoes off and stretched some, twisting his back both ways until it he felt pops all along his spine. He was still restless. Still not quite ready to settle down completely, but he grabbed a book from off one of the table that he’d been reading during those times when he had to wait for Victor to come to him and sat on one end of the massive couch anyway.

He’d only been sitting there for a few minutes when something caught his attention. A slight sound, almost lost in the sound of his own breathing in his ears. Something that sounded like the rattle of a doorknob turning.

Yuri looked up just in time to see Victor slip through the door backwards, not noticing Yuri at all until he let out a tight sigh and closed the door turning around for the first time. Any other time Yuri might have laughed at the surprised noise Victor made as his eyes widened and he stumbled back a little against the door.

“Yuri? What are you doing here?”

“Couldn’t sleep.” Yuri answered simply, still unable to tear his eyes away from where Victor was still hovering by the door. The prince was also in what must have been his sleepwear, black sweatpants that were loose and comfortable looking and a plain burgundy V-neck. His own trainers were tied, but loosely, as though Victor had put in the bare minimum of effort before leaving his own room. “You?”

“Same.” Victor shifted his weight back and forth for a moment and Yuri was struck with an impossible thought. It was almost like Victor was nervous. “I… Uh… I didn’t think anyone would be here this late… I can go…?”

“You don’t have to.” Yuri still hadn’t moved a muscle, almost concerned if he did, it would have startled Victor enough to send the other man flying out into the hall. And if that wasn’t a weird thought, he didn’t know what was. “Unless you wanted to be alone… If so I can go…?”

“No… I…” Victor seemed to come to some kind of decision and he walked the short distance from the door to the couch Yuri was and dropped himself down on the opposite end from the side Yuri had claimed. “I think I’d like to stay, if that’s alright.”

“Of course, it is.” Yuri closed his book and leant back to place it on a nearby table. That accomplished, he turned back towards Victor watching as the prince slipped his own feet out of his shoes and curled his long legs up under him in a mirror of Yuri’s position. “Is everything alright?”
“Yes.” Victor was quick to reassure him. “It’s nothing important. Not really. How about you? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Yuri shrugged, quirking the edges of his lips up into a small smile. “This isn’t the first time you’ve found me in a strange place in the middle of the night in my pajamas and it probably won’t be the last.”

“Hmm.” Victor ran a hand through his silver bangs. “You’re not just saying that you’re fine just to make me feel better, right?”

Yuri shook his head. “I’d tell you if it was bad. I promised you I would. I just felt… Restless, is I guess the best word for it. Usually when I feel like this I would go dance somewhere but, well, I think I’ve already been overdoing it lately.”

“I… Um…” For the first time since they’d met, Victor seemed to be having some trouble maintaining eye contact and he cleared his throat before going on. “If your knee was bothering you, I didn’t notice. Earlier, that is… You… Your dance was perfect. I wanted to tell you sooner, but there were so many people there…”

“Thank you.” Yuri gnawed on his bottom lip for a second. “I’m still not sure about that piece. It’s definitely not my usual style. I’ve had some issues with connecting with it fully, I guess. I always felt like it was missing something.”

“You couldn’t tell. It was… I thought it was perfect.” Whatever was stopping Victor from looking him in the eye before, was gone and when Victor turned his piercing gaze on Yuri, he had to fight down the instinctual urge to shiver under the intense scrutiny. “I should have told you before. I wanted to tell you before, but…”

“But…?”

“But everyone else was in the way and I knew… I knew if I went over there I was going to hold onto you and never let you go.” Victor stated plainly. “I wouldn’t have given a damn who was or wasn’t there to see it either.”

“There’s no one else here right now.” Yuri pointed out as he swallowed hard against the sudden dryness of his throat.
“You’re right. There isn’t.” Victor leant forward, just a bit, just enough and Yuri mirrored his movements on his end as well. “That might almost be more dangerous.”

Yuri didn’t say anything. In his opinion, there wasn’t anything else to say. He never had been the best at words anyway. He’d always been a lot more comfortable letting his body say the things he just couldn’t manage to speak.

This time when their lips met, Yuri didn’t hold back. He parted his lips instantly to allow Victor access and his hands wrapped around Victor’s broad shoulders as they both shifted closer towards each other. Victor’s own hands found their way to Yuri’s hips and Yuri gasped as the other man dug his fingers in hard enough that he was sure he was going to have more than one bruise later.

There was an awkward shuffle when they tried to untangle where their legs were still underneath their respective bodies without breaking any point of contact between them. They almost lost their balance a few times in the process and on the third time Yuri was rocked back in order to get his right leg unstuck from the cushion that was trying to hold him back, he cut his losses and allowed gravity to help, pulling Victor along with him.

Even though their bottom halves still were twisted and half stuck in the back cushions this new position meant that entire weight of Victor’s upper body was now on top of him, something Yuri found he enjoyed immensely.

Their new position must have been something Victor enjoyed as well, because he moaned deeply as soon as Yuri’s back hit the couch, the vibrations moving through where their chests were pressed together and causing Yuri to feel like the breath had been punched out of his lungs. Not that Victor gave him much of a chance to catch his breath before he had brought their lips together again and, honestly, breathing was literally the last thing Yuri cared about right then.

All the restless energy he’d been holding onto since that afternoon buzzed to life in his veins and rushed through him fast enough to leave him dizzy. Now, though, he actually had some kind of purpose to direct it into and he begun to run the palms of his hands over the thin material that covered Victor’s back, grinning into their kiss as the movement caused the taught muscles along Victor’s shoulder blades to quiver under his touch.

Victor never had been shy about reaching out and touching Yuri whenever he reasonably could, but the past few days since their tea date he’d been more tactile than ever before. Almost as though all he’d needed was Yuri to give him verbal permission and, once that permission had been given, nothing else mattered but being in constant contact with some part of Yuri’s body whenever they were within arm’s reach of each other.
On the one hand, Yuri enjoyed it. On the other hand, it had been driving him slowly insane. Like a wire was being pulled taught at the very core of himself. Like every single touch or whispered word was drawing the wire tighter and tighter until the very moment when he felt Victor’s warm hands slide up from his hips and under his shirt, smoothing over the skin that covered his ribs.

That was the exact moment when it snapped.

Yuri moaned, loud in the silent room even with the sound of Yuri’s heart beating in his ears, and he tangled one of his hands in Victor’s hair as he pulled the other man down as close as he could while trying to push up to meet him at the same time.

He wasn’t sure exactly when it happened or even making the conscious decision to go along with it, but the next thing he knew Victor was tugging at his shirt and Yuri was tugging at Victor’s right back. There was an awkward scramble as they both tried to pull of each other’s shirts at the same time. In their impatience, Yuri’s glasses got caught in the neck of his shirt and ended up on the floor tangled somewhere within the small pile of fabric.

With Yuri’s luck, they were probably broken. He’d heard a weird creaking sound when one of the arms had gotten caught on his ear for a brief second.

He honestly couldn’t have cared less.

They’d had to pull apart long enough to dispose of their shirts, but the second Yuri was free he pulled Victor back down on top of him, the distraction letting him shift his body enough so that he was finally able to get his legs free from whatever they had been caught on. For his part Victor went willingly, almost diving back on top of Yuri before catching himself at the last second and bracing his right forearm next to Yuri’s shoulder as his left hand ended up with Victor’s fingers splayed across the center of Yuri’s chest, the prince’s palm resting right over Yuri’s frantically beating heart.

“Yuri…” Victor voice was soft in the quiet of the room but he was so close, Yuri could hear every single drawn out syllable in his name and the soft exhale of breath that came after it. He was close enough to hear how uneven Victor’s breathing was, close enough to see the way his silver bangs were hanging in front of his face, half hiding his blue eyes, darker now than Yuri had ever seen them. Close enough to see the pink flush that spread across Victor’s nose and cheeks. “We… We should stop.”

“I don’t want to.” Yuri responded stubbornly, as he skimmed the palms of his hands down the smooth planes of Victor’s back, noting with a sudden flare of pride that the action caused the forearm Victor had pressed against the side of his shoulder to tremble.
Victor let out a low whine at that and Yuri couldn’t have kept the grin off his face even if he’d wanted to. In an effort not to allow any time for overthinking on either of their parts, Yuri craned his neck upwards and closed the gap between them as he brought their lips back together again.

Despite the flare of hesitation of the moment before, Victor was enthusiastic about kissing Yuri again. Yuri felt his blunt fingernails scraping light against his scalp and he didn’t try at all to repress the full body shiver that went through him at the feeling.

Yuri tipped his head back and his eyes snapped shut when Victor moved away from his lips and skimmed along his jawline and down his neck, pressing open-mouthed kisses wherever he went. It wasn’t like anything Yuri had ever felt before and he wriggled around restlessly underneath Victor’s solid weight.

In retrospect, Yuri wasn’t entirely sure what had caused it to happen. It felt like everything all at once. Victor had tugged at Yuri’s hair while sucking hard at the juncture where his neck met his shoulder and Yuri felt the ghost of teeth across the sensitive skin there which caused his body to arch up off the couch instinctively. Victor’s arm gave out and his body came crashing down even as Yuri’s was moving up and Victor’s hips landed hard right on top of Yuri’s, bringing their groins flush together so that there could be absolutely no question in either of their minds exactly what they were hurtling headfirst towards.

He wasn’t sure exactly what he’d expected to happen in that moment, but Victor freezing before literally throwing himself up and towards the opposite end of the couch was definitely not it.

“Oh, god. I’m sorry. I… Shit… I’m sorry!” Victor was pressed against the arm of the couch now, legs crossed underneath him, face and pale chest flushed with his eye wide. “Yuri, I… I know I shouldn’t have… Wait. Are you laughing at me?”

Yuri tried to shake his head, but he couldn’t quite mange it. Mostly because he was laughing. Hard. Harder than he could remember laughing in his entire life, though it was more at the absurdity of the entire situation in general than really laughing at Victor specifically.

“No…” Yuri finally managed to force the word out in between what had now wound down into hysterical giggling. For his part Victor looked equal measures of confused, shocked, and possibly even mildly affronted. “Not at you.”

“Oh… Okay…” Victor still looked like he didn’t quite believe him so Yuri tried to grapple some
amount of self-restraint back before he ruined everything.

“I’m not, I promise.” His laughter was dying down now, and Yuri wiped away a stray tear from the corner of his eye, schooling his face into something hope looked more serious. “I was… It was… I honestly don’t know. I just… I always thought I would be the one to jump away in, you know, a time like this. Honestly, I was kind of laughing at myself really…”

Victor chuckled nervously, though he didn’t move away from the far arm of the couch. “Oh… Alright. That’s… Fine?”

“I’m so sorry.” Yuri was definitely a lot calmer now, edging towards nervous. “It was either laugh or panic so… I laughed? In hindsight, that was probably not the best choice.”

“It’s definitely better than panicking. Yeah, I think that would have been a bit worse.” Victor ran a shaky hand through his disheveled hair. “You… You shouldn’t be sorry. I should be. I should have stopped before… Well, before it got that far.”

“If that’s true, then it’s both our faults. I could have stopped, too.” Yuri frowned and sighed. “I didn’t want to. If you hadn’t… If you hadn’t stopped I don’t think I would have.”

“Oh…” Victor took a deep breath before cracking a weak grin. “This is awkward, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Yuri was starting to feel a bit self-conscious now that his hysteria had passed and it was becoming more and more clear that Victor was going to stick to his end of the couch. “Should I… Should I go?”

“No!” Victor reached out fast and grabbed Yuri’s right wrist as though he was worried that Yuri wasn’t going to wait for a response before trying to move away. They both glanced down at Victor’s hand for a split second and, as the prince tried to immediately pull it back, Yuri flipped his wrist over and grabbed Victor’s hand in his own, twining their fingers together and holding on tight. “I mean… Stay?”

“Oh, I’ll stay.” Now it was Yuri’s turn to take a deep breath. He shifted around until he was sitting with his legs crossed under him and then waited patiently as Victor had moved to do the same on his end. He didn’t let go of Victor’s hand and the prince didn’t move to try to take it back, so Yuri figured they’d made some progress at least. “Do you… Do you want to talk, or…?”
“I don’t know.” Victor huffed out a weak laugh. “Is awkward silence or awkward conversation better?”

“Neither sound like great options.” Yuri muttered, more to himself than anything else, but it did pull another small chuckle from Victor none the less. “I can’t say I’ve ever actually done this before so…”

“You mean you’ve never had awkward conversations after not going all the way with a boyfriend?” Victor was sounding more and more like normal, though Yuri noticed there was still an out of place quaver in his voice and he was having an unusually hard time with making eye contact still. “I’m actually not sure if I should be jealous about that or not.”

“Trust me, you definitely have nothing to be jealous about.” Yuri shrugged, squirming a bit as that seemed to have caught Victor’s attention enough that he had turned his gaze back to Yuri. “What?”

“Nothing.” Victor waved his free hand through the air. Yuri shot him a glare in response. “I just find it hard to believe that someone like you doesn’t have a string of people in their past for me to be retroactively jealous about.”

Yuri wanted to laugh more in that moment than he ever had in his entire life, but he pushed it down. He wasn’t exactly sure how Victor would take him laughing in his face twice in such a short span. He ended up making an odd choking noise instead.

“Yuri?”

“I’m sorry, it’s not funny. Or, well, it is, but only because you actually believe that I have a long dating history behind me… Or any dating history, really.” Yuri squeezed Victor’s hand in his own. “I never had a lot of free time and no one was ever really interested even if I did.”

“I find it very hard to believe that no one was interested.” Victor’s grin widened and Yuri could see some of the tension relax from his bare shoulders. “What I do believe, however, is that you didn’t even notice they were looking.”

“What makes you say that?” Yuri snapped back, not sure if Victor was teasing or not.

“Yuri… I was dropping hints from the first moment I met you that I really liked you and you thought
I was just being friendly.” Victor squeezed his hand this time.

“Well you were!” Yuri tried to act like he was insulted, but it was hard to keep up the act when Victor was smiling at him in the way where his blue eyes would light up and Yuri felt like he was the only person in the world who really mattered. “Okay, fine. So, looking back, you were being pretty obvious…”

“Just a little.” Victor leant even closer. “There were a few times when I was really starting to worry that you legitimately only wanted to be my friend. I thought I’d ruined everything before it could even start by being overeager… Speaking of… I haven’t ruined things between us now, have I?”

“No. No, of course not.” There were still some whispers in the back of his mind that were trying to convince Yuri that Victor’s violent reaction had somehow been Yuri’s fault. That Yuri had somehow done something wrong to cause it, but he was doing a fairly good job of keeping his focus and holding those voices at bay for the time being. “You were right. We should have stopped way before it even got that far. I mean, is the door to this room even locked?”

“It is.” Victor confirmed and Yuri let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “I always lock it. The last thing I want is a maid or attendant or whoever else interrupting any of the time we get together.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Yuri squinted his eyes and tugged Victor closer towards him. “If we’re going to talk, you’re going to either need to get a little closer or I’m going to have to go looking for my glasses. It’s hard to focus when your face is all blurry like that.”

“Ahh, sorry. I didn’t think about that.” Victor hesitated again, long enough that Yuri was worried he was about to pull back away again and suggest Yuri actually go find his glasses. Just when he was about to give up and slide off the couch to go find them himself, Victor shift forward again, close enough now that their knees were touching and Yuri could see every detail of his face once more. “Is this better?”

“Much better.” Yuri rested his head against the back of the couch and took a moment just to look at Victor’s face. He still looked slightly guarded and maybe a little bit cautious, but he did seem much less on edge at that moment and he mirrored Yuri’s position, resting his own head on the back of the couch as well. “I didn’t… I didn’t ruin anything, did I? By being too pushy?”

“Oh, Yuri… The only way you could ruin anything between us would be by leaving.” Victor punctuated that statement with another firm squeeze to Yuri’s hand. “That… That was totally on me. You were definitely doing everything right. I just… Well, you aren’t the only one that can panic
sometimes. It felt… It felt like you knew what you were doing and I definitely didn’t so… I panicked. A bit.”

“You didn’t know what you were doing and you panicked.” Yuri echoed, not quite able to keep the note of disbelief out of his voice. “Victor, you probably know better than I do what you’re doing when it comes to… Well, that.”

Victor chuckled even as he shifted his weight back and forth like he was embarrassed. “You’d be surprised. You aren’t the only one with a sparse dating history behind you.”

“That would surprise me.” Yuri admitted. “You always seem to know exactly what you’re doing. If you’re winging it, then you are incredibly great at improvisation.”

“Let me guess, you’ve read all those wonderful things the magazines had to say about me?” Victor asked and Yuri nodded sheepishly. “You’ve met the media advisors. What do you think they would want published more? A prince who is confident and charming and great at attracting and keeping attention, or someone who has absolutely no idea what they’re doing half the time?”

“Fair point.” Yuri agree easily. “Although, for someone who keeps saying he doesn’t know what he’s doing, you’ve been pretty fantastic at impressing everyone so far.”

“What can I say? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m a bit of a romantic at heart.” Yuri nodded. He had noticed. It was hard not to. It was like most of the filmed dates were taken straight out of a magazine’s dating section. Private walks and tea in the garden, late night candlelit dinners, movies in a private theater… “Which is kind of how I ended up with less experience than one would expect to be honest with you.”

“How so?” Yuri couldn’t help but ask. He’d never thought about it much, always just assuming those articles about Victor spending time with gorgeous men and women had been true along with the rest of the country, but he should have guessed the truth by now. Victor was nothing like what the press had made him out to be so far.

“I… Um… That is…” Victor pursed his lips and focus on Yuri. “You’ve never told me anything about your past partners. You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.”

“That sounds fair.” Yuri closed his eyes and sighed heavily. This was definitely not the conversation he thought he’d been getting himself into tonight. He actually wasn’t at all sure what he had expected
when he’d left his room, but this was a bizarre situation even for his most ridiculous imaginings. “It’s nothing impressive.”

“I find that hard to believe with the way you were dancing today… And, you know… Earlier.” Victor’s cheeks and nose colored again and Yuri had to fight down the sudden urge to pull the other man forward and starting kissing him again, if only to see exactly how far he could make that blush go.

“I told you. I choreographed that dance for a friend. A friend who is a lot more comfortable with that kind of thing than I am. I, uh, really shouldn’t tell you more about that. I don’t want to get her in trouble.” Yuri blushed as well, suddenly more self-conscious than he had been before. “Before today… Before today I never danced it like that. I just… I saw you come in and I wanted to catch your attention. I wanted to make sure that you were focused on me and no one else. It was stupid…”

“It worked.” Something flashed through Victor’s eyes then, too fast for Yuri to really get a read on what it could have been, but whatever it was sent a shiver down his spine nonetheless. “In fact, I’m going to have to request that you save that particular dance for when the others aren’t around. I’m not sure I like the thought of them getting to see you like that even if I am there.”

“Oh, okay.” Yuri blushed so hard he felt the blood pounding in his cheeks. “That can… That can be arranged.”

“Good.” Victor looked smug and Yuri shook his head in exasperation. “Now, I think you were getting ready to tell me about all of your past boyfriends…”

“Victor, I’m not kidding. There’s not much to tell.” Yuri squirmed as he tried to figure out what he could say that didn’t make him sound like an inexperienced moron. “I’ve never really dated. There, um… When I was twelve Yuko and Takeshi and I were playing Truth or Dare and I kissed both of them just once… Ah, and then there was a boy I was dancing in a production with when I was fifteen. We kissed a few times and then he moved to another company and I never actually saw him again… And then when I was nineteen there was an older dancer with the National Ballet. We ended up in one of the costume closets, but the Costume Director came back from lunch early before we could go much further than just making out and we booked it out of there before we got caught. It turned out he was actually engaged and was trying to get about half the company into that closet for what he called ‘practice’ so that didn’t exactly last long… Or at all really. So, yeah… That’s about it.”

Victor grumbled something under his breath that Yuri couldn’t quite hear even with how close they were sitting to each other. Other than that, neither of them said anything and Yuri started to feel a familiar buzz at the base of his skull while he waited for Victor’s reaction.
“That’s really all?” Victor asked, his voice barely above a whisper. Yuri nodded.

“That’s all.” Yuri let out a tired sigh. “I tried to tell you there wasn’t much. I was mostly following your lead in the hope that you were the one that knew what you were doing.”

“Still, it’s more than me.” Victor admitted after about thirty seconds of silence. “Like you said, I’m a romantic. Always have been. I was eight when Father had his second Selection after Mother died. Ever since then I’ve known that the time was coming for me to have my own. It’s probably stupid, but it didn’t seem in any way productive to try to get close to anyone before now. If I did, it felt like all we would be doing would be breaking each other’s hearts in the end. What are the odds they would end up being Selected?”

“Oh.” Yuri knew that answer was less than articulate, so he tried again. “I never thought about it like that.”

“Of course, there was always the possibility I wouldn’t be able to forge a connection with anyone who was Selected either… I knew it was risky, but it was a risk I was willing to take.” Victor shrugged. “It sounds naïve, I know it does, but I didn’t want to end up like my father. A partner is nice, but I wanted… Well, I didn’t know what I wanted, but I’ve always known I was going to get married and that this was the way it was going to happen. I also knew I didn’t want to bring the ghosts of anyone else into it, so I just… Didn’t. Not until you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” Victor offered up a weak grin. “I told you once before that it’s always been you. I wasn’t kidding. You’re it.”

“You can’t be… You mean you haven’t…?” Yuri took a deep breath in the hope is would chase some of the sudden dizziness that had appeared out of his brain. “Victor, there have been dozens of other men here. Surely you’ve spent some… Quality time with some of them. If you have, I totally understand. You aren’t hurting my feelings at all…”

“I’m not trying to spare your feelings. I’m… I’m telling the truth.” There suddenly wasn’t any nervousness reflected on Victor’s face at all. It was as though, now that he had decided to tell Yuri everything, he wasn’t going to hold back. “I know you told me not to, but after that day when I showed you my favorite spot in the garden and you said you wanted something more from me… That day when I kissed you… How could think I would have been able to stop my heart from getting stuck on you after something like that? It just felt wrong to kiss or hold anyone else after that.”
“Victor…” Yuri sighed out the other man’s name in a mixture of fondness and exasperation. “What if I had decided I couldn’t handle the pressure after all? What if I ended up wanting to go home?”

“To have you, that was a risk I was willing to take. I might be impulsive, but once I set my mind on something I can be quite stubborn when it comes to changing it.” Victor smiled warmly and, even though Yuri tried to keep his expression serious and stern, he could feel the ends of his lips curling up in response. “Besides, I had faith in you, even if you didn’t. So… Anyway… Faking confidence has been part of my life since I was old enough to talk, so… I may have accidentally led you to believe that I had a bit more experience than I actually did…”

“I wish I had about half as much skill when it comes to faking confidence as you.” Yuri grumbled, sending Victor an exaggerated frown when the prince did nothing more than give Yuri his brightest smile in response. “Okay… Well, we’ve never exactly known what we were doing before and it’s more or less worked out for us so far, right?”

“Right.” Victor agreed, though this time Yuri heard the tiny note of hesitation in what was otherwise a chipper response. “Although we… Um… We don’t have to do anything right now… If you don’t want to…”

“What if I want to?” Yuri asked, almost surprised at his own daring in that moment. His answer garnered the exact response in Victor as he thought it would, though. The prince’s eyes widened and he sucked in a deep breath that whistled through his clenched teeth in a way that made Yuri chuckle softly. “I’m just kidding, Victor. I don’t have the time, but it must be late. We should probably head back to bed soon and even with the door locked… Well, it’s not soundproof, is it? The last thing either one of us need is to be accused of breaking the law. Again.”

“If you dance like that when I’m around again, the law is going to be the last thing I’ll be worried about.” Victor had pitched his voice low and Yuri was suddenly very much aware that neither of them had bothered to put their shirts back on yet. He was also aware that they had only moved closer during their conversation, to the point where Yuri was almost in the prince’s lap. “And I’m not tired. Can we talk for a bit longer? Just talk?”

“Sure.” Yuri wasn’t exactly tired either, even though he knew he very well should be. He was also very comfortable and not exactly inclined to want to move away from Victor’s warmth any time soon, even if he knew nothing more than what they had already done was going to happen. Which was actually just as well. Now that he was no longer riding the weird high from before, Yuri wasn’t sure he was going to be able to do much of anything without trembling and utterly ruining everything in exactly the same way Victor had apparently worried he was ruining things. “Was there something in particular you wanted to talk about?”
“Not really…”

The conversation didn’t take long to pick back up again. Somehow, Yuri never found that he ran out of things to talk about with Victor. Even when it was going fast on three am and they were yawning more than actually talking.

The last clear thing he remembered was resting his head on Victor’s shoulder as the prince wrapped a blanket he’d found draped over one of the nearby chairs over them both.

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Yuri didn’t remember his room being quite so bright in the mornings, or his bed being quite so warm, but that point wasn’t the most troubling. He squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as he could and rolled over, mentally cursing his stupidity. He must have forgotten to close his curtains before going to sleep the night before. Usually he was fairly good about remembering, but he vaguely recalled being terribly distracted the night before.

He didn’t get far before he was able to bury his face into something smooth and warm. Not too concerned about that at the moment, Yuri let out a quiet sigh of relief that whatever it was happened to be effective at blocking out any ambient light from the room.

He felt some kind of motion against his back, but as all it accomplished was to pull the blanket wrapped around him up higher and tighter, he didn’t much mind that either. In fact, even though he was starting to get the feeling that he was closer to the edge of his bed than he really should be, he was so comfortable that he wasn’t sure if he ever wanted to get up.

Yuri had almost drifted completely back to sleep when a door slammed open and shut behind him and he frowned and burrowed even deeper into whatever solid thing he’d been cuddling. He was not at all in the mood to deal with Minako this morning.

“Oh for the love of… Seriously?” Minako sounded more disappointed than usual this morning. “Victor! Yuri! Get up!”

“Tell Father I’m sick or something. You’re good at thinking up excuses.”

At the sound of Victor’s voice, and the rumble of it resonating through his chest, a chest that Yuri
suddenly realized was exactly what he was currently cuddling against, Yuri jolted into wakefulness and flung himself back, tumbling over the edge of the couch and onto the floor with a loud thump.

“Yuri? Are you okay.” Yuri opened his eyes a crack, just enough so he could see the blurry edges of Victor’s concerned face looking down at him from the edge of the couch. He groaned and nodded throwing both his arms over his face in response, still not quite awake enough to deal with whatever this was going to be even with the burst of adrenaline he’d just experienced causing his heart to beat so hard he was worried it was about to burst out of his chest. “Ah, okay, then. Does he do this often?”

That question must have been directed towards Minako because she was the one that answered. “It’s been better lately, but there are some times he’s grumpy enough in the mornings that I have to pull the sheets out from under him. He typically does end up on the floor when I do that.”

“Wow… Your family wasn’t kidding when they said you weren’t a morning person, were they?” Yuri didn’t have to look to know exactly what Victor looked like in that moment. He would have an eyebrow quirked and his silliest heart-shaped grin on display.

“Shut up. Both of you.” Yuri grumbled, but he didn’t move, instead choosing to lie on his back until he could hopefully convince himself he was dreaming up this entire thing.

“I wish I could, but we don’t exactly have the time for that.” Minako didn’t sound disappointed in Yuri’s opinion. In fact, he was pretty sure she sounded almost smug and possibly even a little excited. “Lucky for the two of you, I was a bit suspicious when Yuri sent me away last night, so I went to check on him early. If we hurry we can get the both of you back to where you belong before anyone else wakes up to see you’re missing.”

“Do we have to?” Victor’s voice had a tinge of a whine to it and Yuri again knew without having to look that the prince would be pouting. “I’m sure you can think of a convincing excuse…”

“Victor… You know I’m not the only one who has the keys to this room.” Minako sounded about as disappointed as the prince did for some reason Yuri could even begin to fathom. “I think you’d like your father finding you here less than you liked me doing it… Although, I do have to admit that I’m impressed you both still have pants on.”

At that, Yuri couldn’t hold back another groan as he rolled over onto his stomach and covered the back of his head with his hands.

“Yuri? Are you sure you’re okay…?”
“I’ll be fine once I’m done dying of embarrassment.”

Yuri wasn’t actually sure about that at all. Nor was he sure exactly what he was feeling in that moment. There was a bit of embarrassment. Some irritation, too, if only at the way Minako was still an unfailing morning person and it seemed as though Victor might be as well. If he looked deep enough there was a bubble of panic floating below the surface, presumably waiting until he got back to his room so he could indulge in it in peace and quiet.

“Come on, Yuri. This isn’t so bad.” Yuri batted away where Minako was now nudging his ribs with the toe of his shoe. “Besides, you have to know by now I would never give you up. However, we do need to get moving unless you want to try explaining this to someone else. Somehow I doubt they would buy any of your excuses. As for you, Your Highness, your Father has expressed his desire to see you in his quarters immediately.”

“You won’t give him up but you will drop me off to the wolves on your way?” Yuri huffed out a rough bark of laughter directly into the carpet at Victor’s dramatic statement. “Minako… I thought you were supposed to be my most loyal attendant!”

“I was. Now I’m Yuri’s. He doesn’t give me nearly as much trouble for the most part. This current incident excepted, of course.” Victor grumbled something under his breath that Yuri did quite catch and Minako poked Yuri in the side with her foot again. “Time to get up, buttercup. You can have an existential crisis once you’re safely back in your room.”

“Fine, fine.” Yuri pushed himself up into a sitting position and grabbed the lump of clothing Minako kicked towards him, fumbling for a moment before managing to untangle them and toss Victor his shirt before pulling his own over his head. Once he was fully clothed again, he glanced around the carpet and found his glasses lying half under the couch.

They weren’t broken, which he was grateful for, but one of the arms was slightly bent and there was a loose screw where the right end of the frame met the arm. Luckily, neither of those issues were something he couldn’t fix and they would probably hold up long enough for him to get to his room where he had a repair kit tucked away in his bedside drawer.

“Am I really in trouble?” Victor asked as Yuri put his glasses back on and the world came into focus once more.

“I don’t know. Your father certainly wasn’t happy, but Lilia was calming him down when I left to
find you two. I’d be willing to bet she’s talked him down some by now.” Minako shrugged and Yuri took her offered hand and let her pull him to his feet. “I would suggest that the both of you find a different place for your clandestine meetings in the future and avoid any further sleepovers.”

Both Yuri and Victor opened their mouths to say something when Minako cut them off. “Excuses later. Getting you back to where you need to be before someone who might begin a new round of gossip now. I’ll go with Yuri and take a back way. It’s close enough to where we’d be coming from if he was visiting the doctor again. You take the main stairs about two minutes after we leave. If you’re seen you can always say you were thinking about going for a morning jog.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Victor was frowning as he pulled his own shirt back over his head. “Yuri…”

“I hate to admit it, but Minako’s right. Everyone has finally stopped talking about the library thing. We don’t want to give them anything to get them going again.” Yuri did hate to admit it. He’d much rather do exactly as Victor had suggested and just stay there. Perhaps until the world ended. Anything that kept him away from prying eyes for the next century or so sounded great and if Victor was hiding with him that sounded all the better. “I’ll see you at breakfast?”

“Definitely.” Victor cringed as though he had just thought of something particularly unpleasant. “I get the feeling that we’re not going to be sitting together at mealtimes for the foreseeable future, but I’ll see you down there.”

Yuri nodded and waved sadly as Minako grabbed him by the arm and drug him out of the room without giving him a chance to delay any longer.

“Geeze, you’re going to see him in like half an hour. It’s not goodbye forever.” Minako muttered as she dropped his wrist and led the way down a side stairwell that would take them to a narrow hall on the first floor that the various palace staff used to get from the main body of the palace and to the guest wings without having to pass through the main halls where guests or the royal family might be wandering. “I expect this level of clingy from the prince, not you.”

Yuri scoffed, but he didn’t say anything, not quite trusting the halls to be as empty as they should be on a Wednesday morning. For it was worth, he wasn’t used to feeling so clingy either. He felt entirely off balance, not a feeling he was entirely unfamiliar with, but one that still left him reeling all the same.

They made their way back to his room in silence, tiptoeing down the hall with the other guest rooms. Yuri held his breath almost the whole way, not daring to relax until they were back behind his closed and locked bedroom door.
“Right. The others should be waking up soon. I would suggest perhaps having a shower to kill some time. While you’re busy with that I’ll get out something for you to wear today.” Without waiting for a response, Minako was striding across the floor and towards his closet. She spared a brief glance over her shoulder to find Yuri still hovering a few meters away from his door, watching her progress without moving. She sighed heavily and turned back around, placing her hands on her hips as she stared him down. “Can I help you with something?”

“You were really Victor’s attendant?” Yuri asked. He was still stuck on that detail even with all the other things he should be worried about in that moment. That did tend to be the one solid way for him to try to slip by without letting his anxiety gain a proper foothold. For him to focus on things that weren’t related to the thing he was worrying about at all.

“Yes. Before you got here, that was.” Minako tapped her fingers against her hip in a sign of impatience. “A group of new attendants we brought in to assist with the Selected got into some shellfish that had been set aside in the kitchens the day before you all got here. Unfortunately for them, the head chef had set it aside because he was concerned they might have been past their expiration date. It turned out he was right. The king asked if anyone wanted to volunteer to help and when I saw your dossier only had one attendant requested I figured I could leave Victor in the hands of his two other attendants and just supervise from afar. There always was the potential that it would be a short assignment, and, if it turned out it wasn’t, I could always trade off when another attendant became available to take my place.”

Yuri vaguely remembered that question being one of the ones in the massive stack of paperwork he’d had to fill out that day Mila had shown up on his doorstep. He’d originally put zero, but he’d been politely advised that he was required to have a bare minimum of one so he’d regretfully erased it and elected one.

“Then why are you still with me?” Yuri couldn’t help but ask next. “I’m sure there are plenty of people who could take your place by now.”

“Victor doesn’t need me. He’s more adept at cleaning up his own messes than your previous experiences with him would indicate. You, on the other hand, still have a use for my meddling.” Minako took a few steps towards Yuri. “We can have a heart to heart later. Right now you need to get ready for the rest of the day. Mila mentioned last night that you’re supposed to be spending time with the ministers of finance this morning to go over more figures with the national budget. Celestino was a bit worried that some of you still didn’t seem to have a firm grasp of all of the concepts at your last roundtable practice. Go.”

There was a firmness in her tone that told Yuri he wasn’t going to get anywhere further until he did as she said and he scrambled to obey.
As always seemed to be the case since he’d arrived at the palace and his life had been turned upside
down, there would be time for him to sort through everything he’d discovered.
Chapter Notes

I'm sooooo close to being caught up with responding to comments, but it's getting super late and the more important thing right now is getting this chapter up!

I'm housesitting for a friend next week and they have a fantastic internet connection so I should be able to get some stuff knocked out! She also has three dogs and two cats and I'm bringing my dog over so I'm going to have an animal cuddle party on the couch with my laptop. That means more focus and less of an incentive to get up and move around and get distracted. Hahaha.

In other news, these chapters keep getting longer! Gah!

Chapter 22 – Advancements

“If you would stop squirming for five seconds I would be done by now.” Minako smacked Yuri on the shoulder before she reached out with one hand and tilted his head to the side and back to where she wanted it. “Next time you and Victor have some alone time, tell him to keep his teeth to himself and we won’t have this problem again.”

“Minako!” Yuri felt like his face was literally on fire as he flinched away from his attendant again just as she was about to touch the offending spot on his neck with the tube of concealer. He’d hoped the mark would have faded within a day, but in the scramble of them trying to separate, Victor’s teeth must have sunk in a bit deeper than Yuri thought they had and he’d been left with a rather lovely bruise that was still stubbornly sticking around to show for it. “It’s been days. You can barely even see it now. You really don’t have to…”

“I really do have to. Now sit still.” Minako punctuated her statement by grabbing Yuri’s chin in her free hand and physically holding him in place until she’d accomplished covering up the small red spot at the base of his neck. “There. Now, was that really so bad?”

Minako released his face and Yuri frowned and looked away mumbling something under his breath as he did so.

“You want to say that a little louder so I can hear you?” Minako sang out happily as she recapped the concealer and tossed it back onto the bathroom counter.
“I said that it would probably be gone by now if someone would just stop poking it.”

“Maybe. Or maybe not. Better safe than sorry.” Minako ignored Yuri’s sour glare as she rifled through one of the drawers looking for something else he was sure she would use to continue to torture him with in some fashion. “Oh, stop pouting and cheer up. You’re going to have a whole day with Victor today.”

“We’re going to be accompanying him to treaty review meetings all day.” Yuri grumbled as he continued to fidget on the stool he was perched on. “It’s hardly going to be fun and games.”

“Welcome to the real world. Here. Brush your hair.” Minako grinned as she slid a brush across the counter for Yuri to use while she moved her search for whatever she was looking for to the next drawer down. “It’s very rarely fun and games. You’ll get used to it eventually. You’re already doing better than Victor did when he first started getting invited to meetings and state functions… Granted, he was twelve then and you’re more of an actual adult, but still… That has to count for something.”

Exactly how long have you been here?” Yuri asked as he ran the brush he’d been provided through his hair, knowing Minako was a bit freer with her conversation when he was doing as he was told. He’d yet to really have a serious talk with the older woman yet as most mornings they were in a hurry and in the evenings Yuri’s friends were often hanging around.

“Long enough.” Minako responded, still more focused on her search for whatever object she needed that had gone missing than Yuri. “I could have sworn I ordered another jar of hair gel a few days ago…”

“You left it on my bedside table before you stole my pillow.” Yuri tossed the brush back down on the counter as Minako skipped back out into the bedroom to grab the previously abandoned jar. He waited until she’d returned before speaking again. “Long enough?”

“Yes, long enough that I have an intimate knowledge of how things work and don’t work.” Minako flicked the back of Yuri’s hand when he went to reach for his contact case. “No cameras today so you don’t need those.”

“What if I wanted to wear them?” Yuri asked, allowing a thin layer of petulance to cover the question in the hope that it would hide his surprise. He was so used to the cameras being a constant presence in his life, that he actually wasn’t sure how he felt to know they wouldn’t be there.
“Then wear them. I’m not going to stop you. Now, don’t squirm.” Minako dipped the tips of her fingers in the gel and began to gently rake Yuri’s hair back from his face. “You’ll want to be comfortable, though. Despite the royal’s best intentions, these meetings can go on for ages sometimes. Also, no matter how tempting the idea becomes, don’t pretend to go to the bathroom and then go hide in a dark corner somewhere. I’ll find you so quickly it wouldn’t even be worth it.”

“Is that a common thing people do around here?” Yuri bit at the inside of his cheek, not entirely sure if his mind wanted him to be anxious yet or not. “I guess Yurio does keep everyone on their toes.”

“I wasn’t talking about Yurio. I was talking about Victor. Seriously, Yuri, you’re only going to make this take longer if you keep trying to move your head.” Minako sighed heavily and repositioned his head back where she wanted it from where he’d been trying to crane his neck to look back up at her. “Yurio doesn’t hide. He yells and throws things and eventually ends up sulking somewhere off to the side when he doesn’t get his way. Victor, on the other hand, has the attention span of a goldfish and a knack for finding quiet places in the palace where most people wouldn’t think to look for him when he’s bored.”

“O-Oh?”

Minako sighed heavily in response. “He’s remarkably like you in that way. You two even pick most of the same hiding places, although you tend to favor the dance studio more than anywhere else. How do you think I always seem to know where to look when you go missing? This is not exactly my first attempt at wrangling unwilling participants to where they need to be.”

“I haven’t gone off to hide like that in a while.” Yuri grumbled under his breath, still not entirely sure what to do with this newest bit of information. He supposed he should have seen it coming. Victor had mentioned something about only finding that hidden spot in the garden when he’d been hiding from the palace staff after all.

“You did it the other night.”

“That was different!” Yuri shot back, instantly defensive. Minako had so far avoided the topic of his night spent in the parlor alone with Victor, but he should have known she wouldn’t have left it alone forever. “I-I didn’t intend for that to happen. It just did.”

“Uh-huh.” Minako hummed, finishing up with his hair and wiping off any excess gel on a small washcloth she had tucked into the top of her slacks. “Look, I’m not going to spread any gossip, but you can’t honestly expect me, of all people, to believe you just… What? Sleepwalked there?”
“Well, no, but…”

“Yuri.” Minako placed a gentle hand on his shoulder as she said his name. “I’m teasing. I don’t care at all what you and Victor get up to in your spare time. As far as I’m concerned, it’s none of my business. What I am worried about is making sure no one else thinks to try to make it their business as well.”

“We’ve been careful.” Yuri pointed out glumly. That much was the truth. They had both always been very careful. Checking and double checking to make sure they weren’t followed, that no one knew where they were going or that they were even going to be gone.

“You have been. Neither of you are idiots and, as much as he sometimes likes to act like he doesn’t, Victor does have a firm understanding of exactly how things work around here.” They were both looking forward into the mirror now and Minako winked at him through it. “Now, if you’d just agree to marry him, you wouldn’t have to worry about it at all.”

Yuri almost fell off the stool, barely catching himself on the edge of the counter before he could completely tumble to the floor.

“Okay, we’re going to have to really work on controlling your reactions when someone catches you off guard.” Minako steadied him with a firm hand on his shoulder, even as he slumped over and buried his face in his hands. “Are you okay?”

“F-Fine. I’m fine.” Yuri took a deep breath. Minako did have a point. He needed to stop falling off whatever piece of furniture he was perched on whenever someone made blunt statements about the status of his relationship with the prince. “I just… How do you know Victor’s waiting for me to say ‘yes’?”

“I didn’t until right this second, but it was a pretty great guess, don’t you think?” Minako laughed loudly and clapped Yuri on the back while he groaned weakly into the palms of his hands. “We’re also going to have to work on your poker face, but I guess that can be a lesson for another day.”

“There’s no way you just guessed.” Yuri dropped his hands and twisted around so he could shoot his attendant a stern glare.

“Oh, Yuri… I’ve known Victor since he was five.” Minako sighed as she reached out to straighten
Yuri’s shirt collar. “To anyone who knows him well enough, his choice has been obvious for months now. He also tends to be fairly straightforward once he sets his mind to something, and he can have a particularly bad habit of leaping instantaneously. We’d be planning a wedding by now if he had his way, I’m sure of it.”

“He really isn’t subtle at all, is he?” Yuri was pretty sure he already knew that answer to that question and Minako’s quiet huff of laughter gave him all the response he needed to know he was right in his assumption. “You probably think I’m dragging this out for nothing.”

“Not at all.” Yuri’s collar now straightened, Minako brushed off both of his shoulders with a few brisk swipes. “Victor has a good head on his shoulders for the most part, but when he gets excited about something… Well, he can end up being a bit shortsighted. It’s not a bad thing to want to spend some time getting to know him and getting used to the way things are around here before wanting to make a lifetime commitment.”

“You have to understand something, Yuri.” Minako’s face softened as she took a half step back and put some distance between them. “Victor has known his Selection has been coming for a long time. He’s had over a decade to think about his future. Now that it’s here… Well, you can see how he might be a tad impatient to just plunge in and move things along, don’t you? Especially since he might have found someone he actually deeply cares about despite all the odds?”

“I never thought of it like that.” Yuri mumbled, turning over what Minako had just said in his mind. It did make some amount of sense.

“It’s not a bad thing to make him slow down and drag him out from behind those rose-tinted glasses.” Minako reached around him and grabbed his glasses from off the bathroom counter, holding them out for him to take. “Just don’t keep us waiting too long, alright?”

“O-Okay.” Yuri accepted his glasses and put them on, wanting to keep going, but pausing when Minako tapped her index finger against the face of the watch on her wrist.

“Later. I’m not going anywhere. You, however, have a long day of meetings ahead of you that you should not be late for.”

Yuri nodded solemnly. Minako was right. About needing to leave to be on time, and about everything else.
Yuri didn’t have forever to wait.

And he was starting to think he didn’t want wait forever even if he did.

~

Breakfast had been a fairly quiet affair from what Yuri could tell. Yuri had been seated next to Yurio, who had taken up most of his attention with complaints about Yuri being busy the whole day and not being available to fence with him, so he wasn’t able to pay as much attention to everyone else as he would have liked. Even with his concentration firmly fixed on the younger prince, he was still able to notice the murmur of chatter around the table was at a lower level than it usually was and that more than one person looked as though they were still half asleep.

Or maybe it was that the people who were typically the loudest were the ones that looked like they were still half asleep. Phichit, who was normally a morning person on par with Minako was yawning into his omelet and, at the opposite end of the table, Chris had his right elbow propped up on the table and was resting his cheek in the palm of his hand as he pushed the remains of his scrambled eggs around on his plate. JJ and Georgi, who also often carried on rather loud conversations were placed far enough away from each other that it was difficult even for them to talk to each other without their volume level being beyond unbearable. Chloe, who also could be good for livening up even the most somber of moods seemed distracted by something, muttering quietly with Victor whenever she could get away with it without seeming rude.

The strange mood only intensified when breakfast ended and Mila met them at the door to the dining hall, ready to usher them to one of the conference rooms on the first floor. In the scramble of being directed to the right place, Yuri hadn’t noticed that some of the other men had peeled off and hadn’t followed them to their final destination.

By the time he did notice, they were already in one of the smaller conference rooms, with a circular table that took up most of the center of the room set up with six chairs around it and a small desk in the far corner.

Yuri might not have been the best when it came to math, but even he knew enough to know that wouldn’t be nearly enough chairs for all of them.

Although, he had to admit it would be enough for those who had come into the room with him. King Yakov hadn’t hesitated at all before taking up a chair furthest from the door where a bundle of paperwork was sitting and Mila dropped her ever-present clipboard onto the desk in the corner and took up a spot behind it. That left Victor, Chloe, Phichit, Chris and himself to shuffle around and
Yuri could comfort himself with the knowledge that both Chris and Phichit looked just as surprised as he was to find they were the only ones there.

He could tell they wanted to say something, too, probably just as much as he did, but no one did as they moved to take up their own seat around the table.

There was a distinctive lack of name tents to mark the spaces and Victor sank gracefully down into the chair next to Yuri’s without any hesitation. Even though he never would have admitted it out loud, it did make Yuri feel a lot better to have him close and to know that, out of all the other seats he could have chosen, it was the one next to Yuri’s that he’d wanted.

“Mila, do you have the notes from the last meeting?” Yakov barely waited until the last person had settled before turning in his chair and focusing on the redhead in the corner.

“Yes, sir. Of course.” Mila sat up a bit straighter in her chair. “Let’s see... In our last session, we reviewed the tax rate on goods transported via shipping lanes between…”

The sound of a phone ringing cut Mila off mid-sentence and Chloe colored as she hurried to dig a mobile phone out of her pocket, checking something on the screen before hopping to her feet.

“Ah... I need to take this.” The princess offered up an apologetic smile before she turned back towards the door they’d just come through. “Sorry. It’s a friend. She was supposed to call earlier, but time zones can be tricky. It won’t be more than a few minutes.”

Yakov let out a tight sigh, but Chloe either didn’t hear it or didn’t care as she slipped out of the room without even bothering to wait for a proper response.

“I’m starting to think she’s drawing out this treaty review process on purpose.” Victor stated, though the way he was grinning and leaning back in his chair made it seem as though he didn’t mind if that were the case in the slightest. “Do you think she’s using us to extend her vacation, Father?”

“When it comes to the two of you, nothing would surprise me.” Yakov grumbled, more to himself than anyone else, before zeroing back in on Mila. “Forget what we discussed before. Have we received the new documents from the Britannian embassy yet, Mila?”
“They were delivered about an hour ago.” Mila flipped through a few of the pages on her clipboard as she tapped the end of her pen against the surface of the desk. “I haven’t had a chance to sort through them all, but the gist was more along the lines of mutual defense than tariff adjustments.”

“Hmmm…” Victor tapped his finger against his chin. “That would make sense if the chatter we’re hearing out of New Asia can be believed.”

“Stop. They don’t have clearance for that yet.” Yakov held up a hand when it looked like Victor was about to open his mouth to protest. “We had an agreement, Victor. Tariff negotiations, yes. Military operations both real and theoretical, no.”

“So we’re clear for the boring stuff, but nothing interesting?” Chris asked. The only response he received in return was for Yakov to shoot him an intense glare that made Yuri wince in sympathy. “Right. I was just making sure I was reading the situation correctly.”

“Why are we the only ones here?” Phichit asked hesitantly. “Where are the others?”

“With Lilia assisting her with planning for a charity event she wants to run in December.” Yakov wasn’t quite glaring any longer, but he didn’t exactly look any less grumpy either. “You’ll be switching with them after lunch.”

“It was determined that exposing you to both activities would be beneficial as well as allowing us to split you up some in order to cut down on the possibility of too many voices in one place.” Mila explained when it looked like the king was not about to elaborate.

“That and the cameras can be involved in the charity event planning and they aren’t allowed in here. Gives the camera crew something to do aside from meandering around the palace all day.” Victor pointed out. “When the cameras are busy, the media advisors are happy. Happy media advisors mean none of us have to sit in much longer, much more boring meetings about the royal family’s public image. Trust me, this is a much better plan.”

“Still sounds like the others are getting the better end of the bargain.” Chris grumbled, low enough that Yuri was sure only his end of the table was able to hear exactly what he’d said.

“Are we going to get copies of the provisions we’re supposed to be discussing so we can follow along?” Yuri asked, knowing enough to realize that Chris’s big mouth was only going to get them all
in trouble and Phichit seemed to be too tired to care. Or maybe he was about as excited at the thought of a long morning of discussions about taxes as Chris was. Whichever the case may have been, Yuri figured it wasn’t exactly a bad idea to try and redirect the conversation. “It, uh, might be easier for us to keep track that way.”

“Oh, yes.” Mila dug in a drawer in the desk and then bounced to her feet, four packets of paper in her arms. She scurried around the table and began to pass them out. “Thank you for reminding me, Yuri.”

“I get one, too?” Victor asked, sounding excited as Mila handed him a packet as well.

“You get the copy you left here on Tuesday.” Mila smirked as she handed Yuri his own packet. Yuri glanced over and noticed that, while his copy was clearly new with no marks on it anywhere, Victor’s had notes and doodles littered throughout the margins in handwriting that was easily recognizable as the prince’s own. “I figured it was easier to keep it here instead of returning it to you and hoping you remembered to bring it again this morning.”

“Ah… I knew I was forgetting something the other day.” Victor rubbed the nape of his neck and sent Mila an apologetic smile. “Thank you.”

The papers distributed, Mila went back to her corner and settled back down in to her seat. “I would recommend taking them with you this evening, Your Highness. We have a conference call with the Britannian embassy next week and you’ll want to have some time to prepare.”

“Right. The conference call. I remember now.” The way Victor said it made Yuri think he actually hadn’t remembered and, if the sharp look Yakov sent him was any indication, it seemed as though he wasn’t the only one that felt that way. “I’ll make sure my attendants are aware of the meeting and put it on my schedule as soon as we break for lunch.”

“Do you think the princess will be much longer?” Phichit whispered to Yuri under the cover of Yakov grumbling to his son about keeping better track of his appointments.

“I don’t know.” Yuri whispered back, leaning slightly away from Victor in the process. “I guess they can’t exactly go on without her, though…”

“This whole morning is going to be taxes and trade routes?” Chris asked from his corner, interrupting both Phichit and Yuri’s hushed conversation as well as whatever mini-lecture Yakov had been
intending to launch into. “And the afternoon, too?”

“If you don’t want to be here, you can go join the others.” Yakov didn’t even a skip a beat, turning away from his son and towards where Chris was making a show of looking relaxed and unconcerned at suddenly being the center of the king’s attention. “As a Royal Consort, your presence in meetings such as these is not required. It is, in fact, entirely optional and the privilege can be terminated if you don’t want to take it seriously. If you would prefer to spend your time championing a charity instead, you can go find the others.”

“Father, if you kicked out everyone who didn’t take every little thing seriously, you’d be sitting alone in an empty room.” Victor was again completely unfazed by the downright toxic look his father sent him in response.

“If I didn’t know that was exactly what you wanted, you’d be out on your ass so fast your head would spin, boy.” Yakov threatened even though Victor still didn’t look as though the threat registered. “The next person who opens their mouth better have something pertinent to the actual purpose of this meeting to say or else.”

Yuri did not want to risk finding out what punishment would be waiting for them if they stepped out of line and he busied himself with looking over the small stack of papers he’d been given. He furrowed his brow as he tried to make sense of what he was looking at. The language was complex and he couldn’t even begin to fathom some of the percentages listed, but he pressed on none the less and he reached out and grabbed a pen he’d noticed sitting towards the center of the table, jotting down his own notes as the silence stretched on.

Even with the odd atmosphere of the room it was easy for Yuri to fall into a zone where the only thing that mattered was trying to sort through the details of the documents in front of him. He adjusted where his glasses were slipping down his nose once or twice and he could feel the tickle against his forehead where a few strands of hair had broken free from Minako’s application of hair gel earlier that morning. He wasn’t even aware of the time passing as he worked.

It felt calming, having something he could do other than to sit in awkward silence along with everyone else. Yuri never had liked going into anything cold and without any preparation. He always had been the first in the studio in the mornings and the last to leave in the evenings. He’d felt slightly off balance ever since they’d been told about being involved in this meeting the day before and taking even this simple step made him feel like he was tipping the scales back to where they belonged, particularly since the subject matter was far outside the realm of anything he even had passing knowledge in.

“What’s he doing?” There was a voice that sounded a lot like Chris’ coming from somewhere off to the side. Yuri ignored it. The last thing he wanted was to let Chris distract him and get them both
thrown out of the room in the process.

“I think… I think he’s actually reading the treaty.” That voice definitely belonged to Phichit.

“Phichit’s right. He’s reading the treaty.” Victor’s voice was a lot closer than the other two and he sounded something Yuri hesitantly categorized as impressed. “And he’s taking notes. Decent notes. Actually, they honestly look better than my notes.”

“Everyone’s notes look better than yours, Your Highness.” Mila chimed in from her corner and Yuri found himself biting the inside of his cheek as he began to rapidly lose the battle against maintaining his focus. “Maybe if you ask, he’ll give you lessons.”

“Why are you all trying to interrupt the one person in this room that’s actually doing what they’re supposed to be doing?” At the sound of Yakov’s gruff voice, Yuri did look up only to find the entire room was looking at him with varying expressions on their faces.

“Can I keep these?” Whatever they had expected him to say, it clearly wasn’t that as every single person in the room looked at him with obvious surprise. Even Yakov. “I don’t know if we’re going to be in any more meetings, but if we are I’d like to be better prepared for them and I’ve already written on this copy…”

“I told you we should have given them copies in advance, Mila.” Yakov grumbled but he nodded in Yuri’s general direction. “You can keep it. Just don’t leave it lying around somewhere.”

“I didn’t think anyone would want it, Your Majesty.” Mila muttered defensively. “They aren’t scheduled to be in any more meetings after this one…”

“That can be changed, right Father?” Victor asked, suddenly quite a bit more serious than he had been before. “Give them the option to join us whenever they want?”

“Y-You don’t have to, sir.” The calm that had settled over him as soon as he’d had something to focus on had slipped away the longer everyone stared at him and Yuri took a deep breath in the hopes that it would prevent him from stuttering even more. “I, uh… I didn’t realize this was going to be a one-time occasion…”

“It doesn’t have to be.” Victor stated firmly, interrupting Yuri before he could really get going.
“Father?”

“Not whenever they want to, no. They still don’t have clearance for certain subjects.” Yakov looked pensive now. Yuri wasn’t exactly sure if that was an improvement or not, but he wasn’t yelling and he didn’t look disappointed which tended to be his default expression in Yuri’s experience. “I’ll have a discussion with Mila and Celestino once we break for lunch. We’ll work out a schedule.”

Before anyone else could say anything further the door burst open and Chloe skipped back into the room, beaming as she dropped back down into her chair with a happy sigh.

“Sorry that took so long. What did I miss?”

~

“I don’t think there is anyone on this planet that can make trade provisions sound interesting.” Phichit was resting his head in his arms at one of the stone tables out in the garden. As soon as they’d been released with about half an hour to kill before lunch was due to start, Yuri, Chris, and Phichit had made their way outside, Victor and Chloe being held behind even as they had tried to follow by the king wanting to go over something that was above their clearance level before his captive audience could escape completely. “I’m pretty sure most of that flew right over my head. Please, Chris, tell me I’m not the only one.”

“You are not the only one.” Chris agreed quickly. “I got about maybe a quarter of what they were talking about. Well, about a quarter of the sliver I paid attention to, that is. I’m not going to lie, international trading is not exactly something within my wheelhouse. Why don’t you ask Yuri? He took enough notes for the three of us.”

“Why do you keep acting like that’s a bad thing?” Now that they were away from the king, Yuri allowed some of his frustration to show through. “I didn’t know we weren’t supposed to be in future meetings and, I don’t know about you, but if I’m going to be stuck in a meeting I want to be able to at least marginally follow along with what’s being discussed.”

“Don’t make fun of him for taking it seriously.” Phichit propped himself up on his elbows and shot Chris a mild glare. “If you want to stick around here any longer you might want to take it seriously, too.”

“You’re right.” Chris shrugged and grinned. “I’ve been complaining about not getting to know
what’s going on around here and now I’m complaining because it turned out that what’s going on is boring. I guess there is wisdom in that old chestnut ‘be careful what you wish for’.”

“The king said you didn’t have to come if you don’t want to.” Yuri was quick to point out.

Chris waved off Yuri’s comment with a fluid flick of his wrist. “It’s not that I don’t want to come. It’s more that I don’t understand why they would want our input on international issues anyway. We’d be much more likely to have something of substance to contribute in regards to domestic matters.”

“You can’t pick and choose which meetings you want to go to.” Yuri wasn’t entirely sure why Chris’ attitude was bothering him so much right then. He’d been feeling off all day, though, between the anxiety that came from feeling unprepared for the meeting and not wanting to make a fool of himself in front of King Yakov. It very well could have been that everything was finally bubbling over and Chris made as good a target as any. At the very least, the other man never seemed to take offense when others were in bad moods. “If you want to be involved in this part of Victor’s life, then be a part of it. If you don’t, then don’t. It’s as simple as that.”

“As simple as that.” Chris looked at Yuri in a way that made his skin crawl. Like the other man was trying to peer inside his head and see exactly what he was thinking. “Who knows? You might be right. It could be as simple as that.”

“Regardless of the simplicity of the matter…” Chris pushed up to his feet before either Yuri or Phichit could come up with something to say in response. “I didn’t get much sleep last night. I think I’ll try and catch a quick cat nap before our afternoon activities. I might feel a bit better afterwards. I’ll see you both later.”

He didn’t wait to see if Yuri or Phichit had anything to say to that before heading back towards the palace, his long strides putting distance between them quickly and efficiently.

“He’s in a mood.” Yuri commented mildly. Chris’ abrupt departure had done nothing to improve the already awkward mood that had been hovering over them all morning and Yuri was almost concerned he’d done something to make Chris mad at him.

“He’s been in a mood.” Phichit didn’t sound too concerned about it, and Phichit was the one that was always the first to try and make sure his friends were okay at any given moment. The other man’s obvious lack of true worry did help relax Yuri some. “He’s really good at hiding it when he’s around the others, but he’s had a lot on his mind lately. I wouldn’t take it personally.”
“Oh… I didn’t… I didn’t know…”

“Of course, you didn’t know. He didn’t tell you.” Phichit rolled his eyes and let out a dramatic huff of air. “Honestly, so many problems would be solved so easily if people would stop sulking and just talk about it. You’re bad about it, too, you know.”

“I am?” Even as the words left his mouth, Yuri knew it was a stupid question and the complete and utterly incredulous look Phichit was giving him confirmed that. “Right, sorry. Reflexive denial. Ignore that.”

“Trust me. I will.” Phichit sighed again before he reached out across the table and poked Yuri hard in the shoulder. “Come on, then. I thought we were supposed to be best friends. Best friends don’t hide all the juicy details about their relationships. I’m actually pretty sure that’s written into the law books somewhere. Spill it, Katsuki. What’s really up with you and Victor?”

“W-What do you mean?” Yuri glanced around the area quickly, finding it as abandoned as it had been when they’d first arrived. “There’s, um, nothing really… I mean, I really don’t…”

“You really do.” Phichit cut Yuri off bluntly as he tried to poke at him again. This time, Yuri saw it coming and wriggled back so that he was out of reach and balancing on the back edge of his bench. “What exactly it is that you do with Victor during your secret meetings, I don’t know because you won’t tell me, but I’m not an idiot. Also, Minako has some pretty phenomenal make-up skills, but you have a really bad habit of rubbing your neck when you’re embarrassed or nervous. You might want to go up to your room and reapply some concealer before lunch.”

Yuri made a small squeaking noise in the back of his throat and clapped a hand over the base of his neck where Minako had applied concealer that morning. He was halfway through trying to stutter out some kind of denial, though he wasn’t sure exactly why since it certainly wasn’t going to do him any good, when Phichit broken down into hysterical laughter.

“Jeeze, one of these days you’re going to have a stroke from having all your blood constantly rushing to your face like that. I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone go from zero to neon red so quickly before I met you.” How Phichit was able to speak with any amount of coherency when he was laughing so hard he was starting to wheeze, Yuri would never know, but it didn’t exactly make him feel less grumpy about the entire situation. “I really need to get someone to give me a cell phone so it’s easier to keep a camera on me at all times. I don’t even care if it’s connected to a network. So long as I can use to it to document all your absolutely amazing facial expressions.”
“That sounds like a fantastic way for you to end up with a broken phone.” Yuri groused, although he couldn’t manage to put any amount of venom into the words. After all, laughing at Yuri was a better reaction than being defensive or upset or obviously jealous, which is exactly what Yuri was sure he would have been if their positions had been swapped. “It’s not funny.”

“That’s a matter of personal opinion. For example: I, personally, find this hilarious.” Phichit’s laughter had trailed off into intermittent giggles by then. “Oh, Yuri, I gave up on Victor a long time ago. I’m not even harboring the most innocent of grade school crushes anymore. You, on the other hand, have it pretty bad from what I can tell.”

“I don’t think you can tell anything.” Yuri was convinced that being stubborn wasn’t going to help him out of this mess, but he was also too stubborn to give up without at least trying.

Phichit rolled his eyes so hard at that Yuri was almost concerned they were about to roll right out of the other man’s head.

“Anyone with eyes and more than two functioning brain cells can tell.” Phichit had his chin propped up in the palm of his hands again and he was looking at Yuri in a way that made him feel like some kind of experiment. “Go on, deny it a few more times if you feel like you have to, but it would be much easier for both of us if we could cut to the chase and you give me all that juicy best friend gossip you keep holding back from me.”

Yuri didn’t say anything for several long minutes as he stared at Phichit through narrowed eyes. It wasn’t like he really thought he was going to be able to gauge Phichit’s true thoughts and intentions that way, but it did give him more time to try to get a handle on his whirring thoughts.

“This trying to read my mind thing is great and all, but we’ve got about fifteen minutes before lunch and you still need to drop by your room and cover up that hickey again.” Yuri shifted around in his seat and pulled at his collar while giving Phichit what he hoped was a good disgruntled expression. If the smirk his friend was sending his way was any indication, he was probably sporting something a lot closer to a pout than anything else. “Look, I already told you I don’t even want Victor anymore… Ugh. How can I prove it to you… Oh, how about this? If it makes you feel better, this is the first time your cover-up job failed you. So, unless Chris put the pieces together like I did, then I’m the only one who knows and I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“That is… Shit.” Yuri groaned and rubbed his hands across his face, almost dislodging his glasses in the process. “Fine, I like him. You caught me. I’m doing the thing that we were all brought here to do by actually liking the person who might possibly want to marry me someday. Wait… If you aren’t trying to marry Victor, then why are you still here?”
“’Cause I like you.” Phichit chirped happily, mood instantly perking up at Yuri’s admission, sarcastic though it may have been. “You know, as a friend. Sorry, but it turns out that you also are not my cup of tea when it comes to men. No hard feelings?”

“Um, yeah, okay. No hard feelings.” Yuri sighed heavily. “Phichit… I’m sorry. I know you’re my friend, but I just… No one was talking about their interactions with Victor either. I didn’t want to start any disagreements or cause any hurt feelings.”

“You are forgiven.” Phichit’s earlier low mood seemed to be completely gone now. In fact, this was probably the most chipper Yuri had seen him in a week. “We don’t have time now, but you owe me a good, long gossip session and you are not going to wiggle out of it this time around, do we understand each other?”

“No… I mean, yes… I mean…” Yuri took a deep breath. “I understand that you want to talk. What I still don’t understand is why.”

“I’m starting to get the feeling that you either don’t know the meaning of the term ‘best friends’ or that you are being obstinate on purpose. I’m also open to the possibility that it could be a little bit of both.” Now it was Phichit’s turn to sigh, but the smaller man also slid off the bench and stood up while he was doing it. “Okay… Let me try to break it down this way. I enjoy being your friend. You are a good person. I can also tell that you like Victor and I’m pretty sure that astronauts would be able to see that Victor likes you just as much from space by this point. There doesn’t seem like much of a point for me to make a play for the prince’s heart even if I wanted to knowing that. Which, again, I want to make very clear that I don’t want to. You know, marry Victor. That is a thing I don’t want to do, but I do think it is something you wouldn’t entirely mind.”

“Phichit…” As much as Yuri was worried that what Phichit was saying was too good to be true, the larger part of him didn’t care. He had always been more of an introvert than anything else, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed being alone, or not having someone he trusted to talk to about all the things that were buzzing around in his brain at any given moment. As much as he like Minako and trusted her, it still wasn’t the same as having someone like Phichit to be a sounding board. “Thank you.”

“No problem at all.” Phichit bounced around to his side of the table, standing there with his hands on his hips until Yuri got the hint and stood up as well. “That’s what friends are for. Come on, we should walk and talk so that we’re not late.”

Phichit grinned widely and grabbed Yuri by the arm and tugged him in the direction of one of the smaller side doors at the back of the palace. Yuri was sure it was a deliberate choice and intended so they wouldn’t pass through any of the main living spaces where it would be more likely they could run into someone they would know, but before Yuri could mention it or thank the other man for his foresight, Phichit was off and talking a mile a minute as he usually did.
“One of the first things we are going to work on in our new status of being besties for life is your complete and utter lack of awareness when it comes to noticing when people are trying to be friendly with you.” Phichit nudged Yuri with his shoulder, but plowed on even as Yuri was opening his mouth to rebut that statement. “For the record, you are terrible at that and you know it. I’ve been hinting for months that it was safe for you to talk about whatever’s on your mind with me and every single thing I tried flew right over your head with plenty of space to spare. I was getting to the point where I thought I was going to have to throw you down and sit on you in order to get you to listen. Oh! Was that what Victor had to do, too? When he was trying to get you to notice he had warm, tingly feelings about you? Let me tell you, I was really starting to feel sorry for him watching you walk right past all the hints he was dropping without even noticing.”

“I’m not that bad!” Yuri shoved Phichit with his own shoulder, glowering as the motion only served to send Phichit into another fit of giggles in response. “And, for your information, Victor didn’t have to do anything. Just because I couldn’t believe it was happening, didn’t mean I didn’t notice…”

“Go on, go on!” Phichit urged. “What did you notice? The way he always looks for you first when he enters the room? Or was it the way he would stare at you with those big, blue, puppy dog eyes whenever he thought he could get away with it? Oh! Or was it how when sometimes you’ll do this thing with your hips to kind of stretch out a little and he’ll kind of get this blank look on his face? Or maybe…”

“Phichit!” Yuri disentangled his arm from Phichit’s firm grasp and clapped a hand over his friend’s mouth in an effort to stem the flow of his babbling long enough to get a word in edgewise. “Can you slow down for like five seconds? Please?”

Phichit mumbled something that was muffled by Yuri’s hand, but the other man nodded and Yuri hesitantly let him go, bracing himself just in case Phichit still hadn’t quite calmed down.

“Sorry. I got a little excited. My bad.” Phichit didn’t seem put out at all by Yuri’s request and he hooked an arm around Yuri’s shoulders as they made their way back inside. “You’ve been killing me keeping everything to yourself.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you are somehow much more invested in my relationship than I am?” Yuri asked, still slightly stunned and more than a little off-kilter from trying to parse through Phichit’s enthusiastic reactions. “Are you… You’re serious, aren’t you? About not being here for Victor’s sake?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t lie to you about that.” Phichit waved off Yuri’s concerned expression easily. “You can ask him later if you don’t believe me. He’s been very nice about the whole thing. Letting
me stay so my family can keep collecting the stipend. I’ve been putting some of it aside, too, for when this is eventually all over. It should be enough to pay for me to go to school for a bit. Figure out what I want to do as a newly minted Three. Taking over the family business never really was something I was all that into, you know, so I figured this might be a good thing even if I’m not the one that comes out of this with a husband.”

“That… Sounds exactly like something he would do.” Yuri agreed. “Okay, I believe you.”

“Finally.” Phichit rolled his eyes yet again. “I know we don’t have time now, but you will talk to me, right? Soon? It could help you feel better. At least, I know it would make me feel better to have someone to talk to who’s intimately aware of what I might be going through.”

Yuri had never really thought about it like that. He’d always assumed that no one would want to hear anything he would have to say about his relationship with Victor because it would have made them uncomfortable. Of course, he’d also been running under the assumption that they were all competing for the same thing this whole time. He hadn’t considered that some of the others might have changed their minds or their reasons for being there.

“I am sorry.” This time Yuri wasn’t just saying it because he felt a polite urge to apologize. This time he really meant it. The more he thought about it, the more he realized Phichit had only ever been trying to help and Yuri hadn’t exactly been a good friend in return, hiding things and passing on spending time with the other man even when he wouldn’t have anything important to keep him away. “I was so worried about upsetting someone that I didn’t pay enough attention. I’ll… I’ll try to do better.”

“I’ve already said I forgive you.” Phichit’s grin was wide and sincere. “And I guess I shouldn’t blame you, either. It’s not like we all walk around wearing signs broadcasting our level of interest in Victor’s affections. I’m sure there’s one or two people still hanging around hoping you somehow manage to blow it with Victor and they can swoop in and take advantage. Granted, I’m not actually convinced there is a way you could do that, but to each their own.”

They had reached Yuri’s room by then and Yuri pulled his key from out of his pocket and twisted it in the lock. Phichit had made a beeline for the bathroom as soon as they’d cleared the threshold, moaning about Yuri’s lack of proper selection of cosmetics as he went. Yuri let him go, knowing a losing battle when he saw one.

Well, at least he’d ended up with a fully confirmed best friend out of this whole mess of a day.

That had to count for something.
“You really want to go to more meetings?” Victor asked after dinner when they were locked away in the library under the pretense of Victor wanting to go over some of the notes Yuri had taken earlier that day. They still hadn’t figured out a good enough place to pick back up on their secret meetings, but, aside from Yuri, no one really seemed too enthusiastic about working when they didn’t have to be, so no one had invited themselves along for the time being. “You know you don’t have to. If you’re more into working with charities, that’s not exactly a bad thing…”

“Do you want me there?” Yuri asked in return, shuffling the papers in front of him nervously. “I, um… Now that you mention it, the queen isn’t often in those meetings either, is she?”

“No, not really, but that’s because she doesn’t want to be. Like my father said, it’s not a requirement for a royal spouse to be included…” Victor shrugged, but Yuri noticed he wasn’t exactly as relaxed as he was trying to look. “I won’t lie to you, Yuri. It is the more traditional route. For the regent to manage the country’s business and for the spouse to do more in the way of glorified community outreach, but… Well, I’ve never exactly fallen in line with tradition so if you want to be there, I’ll make sure to follow up with Father on whether or not he should proceed with adding it into your schedules.”

“Do you want me to be there?” Yuri repeated his question. He reached out and grabbed Victor’s hand, waiting until the prince got the hint and looked him in the eye before asking one more time. “Do you want me to be there with you?”

“Yes.” Victor shifted his chair closer to Yuri’s as he spoke. “But I don’t want you there if you don’t want to be. I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do just because you think it would please me.”

“I want to be there.” Yuri stated firmly. “It was interesting. Well, the bits I understood were interesting, that is. I’ll be able to follow along better once I’ve gotten a chance to study up on some of the concepts more… You do have the rest of the portions of the treaty we’re allowed to have so I can look them over before the next session, right?”

“I do.” Victor said, but he hesitated to pass them over. “You really don’t have to study them.”

“I really do.” Yuri insisted as he tried to reach out with his free hand to grab the stack of papers by Victor’s elbow. The prince used said elbow to push them just out of Yuri’s reach. “Victor… It’s
going to take me hours to break even a section of that down into something I can understand and I’d rather not do it in the middle of the meeting next time.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m starting to get the feeling that you aren’t telling me something.” Victor waited patiently while Yuri frowned and tried to reach for the treaty again. It was difficult when Victor wouldn’t release the hand he was holding or make any move to shift the papers back into Yuri’s reach. “If you have any questions about some of the material, you know you can always just ask me.”

“You have far more important things to worry about than explaining treaty provisions to me.” Yuri sighed as he tried and failed to grab the documents again. “I just… Some of the language used is complex and it takes me a minute or two to translate it into something simpler. I’ve also never been the fastest of readers anyway… It’s not a big deal. I’ll be ready before next time if you’ll just give me those papers…”

“Yuri…”

“I’m not exactly sure what you want me to say, Victor.” Yuri snapped, suddenly feeling extremely defensive. “It’s not like there are a lot of context clues to follow. These were documents written for people who have experience with these kinds of things. I don’t have that kind of experience and I’d rather not stop the flow of discussion every time I have trouble figuring out what a term means.”

“No one expects you to be an expert. They aren’t going to think any less of you if you need to ask a question every so often.” Victor was still staring at him as though he was trying to see through Yuri’s head and into his swirling thoughts. It was not making him feel any more comfortable and Yuri averted his eyes off to the side of Victor’s head in the hope that it would relieve some of the pressure he was feeling. “Phichit and Chris asked questions and so did the others in the afternoon meeting. None of you are expected to know…”

“We’re at least expected to know what the words mean.” This time when Yuri tugged on his hand Victor let him go. “I know I’m not stupid, but I would definitely feel pretty damn dumb if I had to stop an important meeting to ask the meaning of a word I’m probably expected to know.”

They were both silent for a long moment and Yuri folded his arms across his chest and allowed his shoulders to slump a bit. Every cell in his body felt like it was on high alert and his muscles itched with the desire to push his chair back and away, but he resolutely resisted the urge. The irrational part of his brain always wanted him to run away. The logical part helped to keep him in place.

After all, Victor didn’t know he’d stepped on a rather large exposed nerve. It wasn’t his fault.
Particularly since it was a nerve Yuri hadn’t even really known existed until that moment.

The silence stretched on long enough that Yuri’s skin started to feel tight and a buzzing began in his left ear. Eventually he was the first one to break it if only in a blind attempt to stave off any impending panic attacks.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. It’s… It’s not your fault.” In order to give his hands something to do other than dig his nails into his own bicep, Yuri ran a hand through his hair, wincing as he felt the tacky remains of Minako’s gel job. “It’s my fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just… I don’t know. Embarrassed is probably the closest word for it, and it’s stupid and pointless and I’ll work through it, so there’s really no need to worry about me…”

“Yuri…” Victor cut him off before he could babble any further. There was another brief pause as Yuri took a deep breath in order to try and calm himself somewhat before Victor went on. “You don’t have to tell me what’s bothering you if you don’t want to, but I wish you would. I only want to help, if I can.”

“There’s not a lot you can do I don’t think.” Yuri bit at his bottom lip as he debated whether he could even put what he was feeling into words that would be comprehensible. He wasn’t doing an entirely great job of understanding it himself. “I… I’m having a hard time with some of the more complicated things we’ve been expected to do lately… Things that are a lot easier for some of the others to keep up with. Stuff they learned in school that I’m seeing for the first time. It’s… It’s a bit of an adjustment, but I’m catching up. It helps to have access to documents in advance so I don’t feel like I’m having to figure it out on the spot, so if you could just give me those papers…”

To Yuri’s immense relief, Victor did slide the stack of papers across the table at long last. Though he did it slowly and wasn’t quick to pull his hand back even when Yuri still kept his own arms firmly on his side of the table instead of grabbing the paperwork in front of him.

When it became obvious to the both of them that Yuri wasn’t about to say anything further without at least a little prompting Victor spoke.

“Did you… Did you have an intermittent formal education, or…? I mean, I’ve heard that sometimes families pull their kids in and out of school periodically for various reasons…” Victor trailed off and now he was the one looking uncomfortable. So much so, that Yuri felt his mood stabilize enough to take pity on the other man.
“More like zero formal education.” Yuri unwrapped his arms from around his torso and shrugged easily. He knew it had never bothered him before and he shouldn’t let it now. “I’ve actually never been inside a classroom before in my entire life.”

“Oh…” Even though it had happened a few times in the past few months, it was still odd for Yuri to see Victor be the one who was stuttering or lost for words. It made something in the center of his chest flutter and the jagged edges of his nerves soften a little to know that he wasn’t the only one that could end up in over his head sometimes. “You… Um… You wouldn’t be able to tell.”

“Thanks. I think?” Yuri tried, and slightly failed, to hold back a chuckle at Victor’s instantly horrified expression. “Victor, it really is fine.”

“Did you not have any opportunities?” Victor was quick to try and cover up his momentary lack of composure and Yuri could tell that he was genuinely curious. “Father and I have always been concerned there might be gaps in making sure everyone has access to at least a bare minimum of education. That’s kind of what the new pilot program at the library was all about…”

“It wasn’t necessarily for lack of opportunity.” Yuri explained. “Our city is large enough for there to be several public schools I could theoretically have attended. I didn’t want to. I’ve said it before, but I really was lucky. Dad’s always been a writer. He taught Mari and I how to read and write. Both of my parents have seen far too many Fives, Sixes, and Sevens get taken advantage of because they couldn’t read lease agreements or contracts to let us go out into the world without knowing at least that much. He’s a bit of an expert when it comes to that so he always reviews any contracts Mari or I get to make sure they are fair. I also know enough math to make sure that I can manage my own personal budget and to be able to tell if someone is trying to screw me when handing back my change. Until now, I’ve been able to get by perfectly fine with just that.”

“I’ve known for a long time what I wanted to do with my life. Not going to school meant I could take roles other kids might have had to turn down if they wanted to be in class. It meant I could practice when they were studying.” This time when Yuri shrugged, it felt more fluid. The more he said, the more he realized he had absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. It wasn’t like he knew he was going to be sitting in on treaty review meetings when he’d been six when he’d figured out his dream or any time after that point when he’d been making life decisions. “A lot of Fives have talent. Not a lot of Fives have the chance to be in a studio for ten hours a day. I did. It’s probably part of the reason I was able to get as far as I did.”

“Yuri, I’ve seen the way you dance. I think you are underselling how much talent you really do have.” Yuri’s hands were back on the table now and Victor reached out to take one, pausing about halfway through the motion and looking Yuri in the eye, asking a silent question. In response, Yuri closed the distance on his own, grabbing Victor’s hand himself and holding it tight.
“Maybe, but I’m not kidding about how much time I put into it either.” For once, Yuri wasn’t in the mood to argue with someone about innate talent versus pure hard work and determination. “Dancing was something I wanted, Victor. Something I wanted desperately. I didn’t want to open a restaurant with my family. I didn’t want to go to school like Mari did. I wanted to dance. I learned whatever my dad had to teach me, but it wasn’t a priority. You don’t need algebra or science or even the ability to read and write to dance.”

“I don’t exactly regret it either.” Yuri pressed on before Victor could say anything that might have him second guessing himself again. “I was young and shortsighted. I couldn’t imagine a time when I wouldn’t be able to dance, but that still doesn’t matter much. If I hadn’t been Selected I would still have been a Five. What good is knowing whatever they teach in schools when you aren’t going to get the chance to use it? If this had never happened… If you had never happened… I don’t know what I would have done, but I doubt it would have involved official documents or needing to know the ins and outs of taxation percentages.”

“You don’t… You really don’t have to go to meetings if it makes you feel… If it makes you uncomfortable, that is.” Victor still seemed nervous and Yuri felt the very last dregs of tension leave him. It was impossible to be upset when Victor’s hand was shaking slightly underneath Yuri’s. “I really like talking with you about it in the evenings. You have… You have really good opinions sometimes which was why I thought… Which was why I thought you might want to be there to give them in person, but you really, really don’t have to. This is fine, too. Talking it over with you…”

“It’s not that I don’t want to go.” The last thing Yuri wanted Victor to think was that he didn’t want to be there. “It’s stupid. I shouldn’t be frustrated at all. It’s my stupid anxiety talking. Trying to convince me that I should be better than I am. I don’t regret choosing what I did when I did it, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have a lot of catching up to do now. I really should thank my parents for making sure I at least know what I do know.”

“You’re doing fine. Better than fine. In fact, if you hadn’t told me I wouldn’t have known otherwise.” Victor took a deep breath and Yuri felt some of the trembling in the prince’s hand abate. “Thank you for that, by the way. For telling me. You didn’t have to.”

“I guess that’s part of the whole ‘trust’ thing.” Yuri let out a flat bark of laughter and Victor smiled for the first time since their conversation had begun in response. “And I guess I wasn’t exactly thinking logically when I told you I didn’t want your help. I do want it. You know, whenever we can get away with it, of course.”

“Of course.” Victor did look more relaxed overall, but he still looked somewhat pensive. Before Yuri could even open his mouth to ask if there was still something bothering the prince, Victor pinned him in place under his intense blue gaze.
“I know I’ve asked you this before, but… If you could go back. If you could dance with the National Ballet again, would you do it?”

“I’m still not sure why you’re asking the question. I’ve already told you it’s a moot point.” Yuri fidgeted, but didn’t pull back or let the spike of nervousness overwhelm him. It was far easier to brush off the question than open the door and let all his old conflicting emotions back in. “I can’t. Their doctor would never clear me. No amount of hard work and dedication is going to be able to fix torn tendons and give me back the strength I used to have in that knee.”

“You really do not like playing the ‘what if’ game.” Victor smirked as he laughed under his breath. Yuri simply frowned. “Humor me. If you didn’t have a bad knee, would you even have applied to be here at all? If you could go back, would you?”

“I don’t know.” Yuri did know he didn’t want to answer either of those questions. He actually wasn’t entirely sure if he could or even where to begin, but Victor sounded serious. Sounded like it was something he desperately need to know even if he held that desperation tightly in check behind a solid mask. Yuri knew enough now to be able to see it no matter how hard Victor tried to hide it and that knowledge made something twist painfully in his chest. “I do miss it sometimes. Not necessarily the National Ballet in specific, but being able to dance on a stage. It’s all I ever wanted to do and it’s… It’s hard to think that I’ll never get to do that again, but I’ve been happy here. I am happy here. With you. Because of you.”

“The only thing I know for sure is that I don’t want to leave you. Not if there is anything I can do to prevent it.”

And Yuri meant it. So long as it was within his power, he did not want to leave Victor’s side.

And he was willing to do whatever it took to make sure Victor wanted to keep him there as well.
Developments

Chapter Notes

Super sorry for the delay. I was ambushed by my boss week before last and volun-told I was going to be on a new project so I was stuck in intensive training that didn't end until Friday.

I was intending to post on Saturday since this chapter has been done and edited since then, but I happen to live in southeast Texas in the Houston metropolitan area so hurricane Harvey kind of blocked those plans as well as taking our power for the past few days. Myself and my family and my animals are all totally safe so no need to worry. We're high and dry, but flooded into our neighborhood since the way in and out is under about eight feet of water, but we've got plenty of food and the power comes on again every so often so we're doing well. There's even a National Guard staging area about a mile or so away so help is close if we do end up needing it. I'm just happy to have electric back for now. Fingers crossed the power stays on for good this time!

I haven't been slacking while I've been going stir crazy in my house. I've resorted to handwriting most of chapter 24 so all I really need to do is type it up and edit, but I don't want to make any promises since power is spotty and I'm not sure when I'm going to be called back into work... Apologies in advance for what I'm anticipating to be another long break between chapters.

Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos and support! I hope you enjoy the new chapter!

Chapter 23 – Developments

Yuri’s life at the palace fell more and more into a concrete routine day after day as September started to creep towards the beginning of October.

It helped that he didn’t feel quite as alone anymore, too.

Minako was opening up to him more and more, answering questions about life at the palace and telling him stories about her time there. Phichit, too, was making even more of an effort to spend time with Yuri and, for his part, Yuri was actually letting him instead of pushing him away.

Which was why they were both in the dance studio on a Tuesday afternoon, Yuri stretching in preparation to work on some of his choreography while Phichit chattered away at him.
“I don’t know how you do it.” Phichit was sprawled on his stomach on the floor, flipping though some kind of magazine while Yuri used the barre to go through his usual routine.

“Don’t know how I do what?” Yuri asked as he held his left leg straight out to the side, focusing hard on keeping it perfectly in line with his body as he lifted it up and down.

“All kinds of things, really. That’s definitely one of them.” Phichit glanced up right as Yuri had managed to get his ankle in line with his ear. “Do you not actually have bones, or are they just made out of rubber?”

“Could be either really.” Yuri muttered as he kept most of his focus on his stretch rather than the conversation. “It helps that I started ballet when I was still young and malleable. I’m still not as flexible as I used to be, though.”

“If this is you not as flexible as you were before, I don’t think I want to see the ‘before’.” Phichit had shook his head and went back to flipping through his magazine. “What I also don’t understand is how you manage to make it through any of those meetings without falling asleep. You can’t really find all of it interesting.”

“I don’t.” Yuri lowered his leg slowly back down until it was level with his hip and then he extended it out behind him, sticking his chest out and arching his back as he did. “There’s a good bit of it that isn’t interesting at all, but I also don’t want to miss something that could be important by drifting off.”

“You’re definitely doing better than any of the rest of us, so whatever you’re doing must be helping.” Phichit flipped another page idly. “Although, you’re also probably the one trying so I guess that does make sense the more I think about it.”

“Well, Victor told me once that he wanted someone who could be his partner as well as his spouse. I can’t explain it really, but I feel like it’s important to him for me to be there and I really don’t mind.” Yuri lowered his leg to the floor and pivoted on his toes, turning to begin the same set of exercises with his right leg. “Not that I don’t like charities, but I’m significantly better at helping Victor than organizing any of that.”

“Really? He said that?” Yuri didn’t even have to look to know that Phichit’s wasn’t staring at his magazine any longer.

“Yeah, he did.” Yuri let out a long exhale as he raised his right leg over his head, wincing at the
twinge of discomfort the position caused in his knee. “Months ago.”

“Before or after you decided you liked him as more than a friend?” Phichit pressed.

“Um… Around the same time.” It was still a bit odd talking to Phichit as though he was nothing more than a friend and not a rival possibly trying to look for weak spots, but it helped that Phichit was a person who was generally easy to trust. “I dunno. That part happened kind of quickly as far as my conscious mind was concerned. I’m still a bit fuzzy on the ‘when’ details.”

“I still can’t believe you actually thought, even for the smallest of seconds, that Victor was going to let you get away with the ‘just friends’ thing.” Yuri could see Phichit shaking his head out of the corner of his eye. “He’s been infatuated with you since the beginning. Even the media advisors are losing the battle when it comes to trying to convince the general public that any one of the rest of us have a chance.”

“And how would you know that?” Yuri asked as he lowered his leg back down to ground and turned to look at Phichit. “I doubt you were able to get any one of them to talk to you. You know if you get caught spying…”

“I wasn’t spying. It’s in here.” Phichit held up the magazine he’d been reading and waved it back and forth. “Or, well, not in this one specifically, but another one I read the other day. Some columnists and fans are starting to get more vocal about why there’s so little footage of you and Victor going on dates, and yet whatever they do release photos of segments with the two of you together it’s pretty obvious there’s a connection there. Someone even wondered if you’ve already eloped.”

“Wait? That’s an option?”

“Doubt it.” Phichit shrugged. “That doesn’t mean people can’t speculate about it, though.”

“Where did you even get that? I thought they were keeping most of those things out.” Yuri took a few steps forward and sank down to the ground in front of Phichit, pulling his legs underneath him and raising his arms in the air and he twisted his back from side to side.

“Yurio sneaks them in. How, I don’t know, but I think he does it specifically because he knows he’s not supposed to and it pissed Mila off to have to constantly keep an eye out for them.” Phichit pulled the magazine into his lap as though he was almost worried Yuri was going to try and take it away.
“I’m grateful that little punk does have a way of getting them in. Sometimes it’s the only way to get any amount of news on what’s going on in the real world.”

“So what’s going on in the real world, then?” Yuri asked. He’d given up months ago at getting any answers and the letters he received from his family gave him all he needed to know in regards to his social circle back home. Knowing they were all safe and happy had always been enough, but that didn’t mean Yuri didn’t feel a prickle of curiosity at what information Phichit might have that he didn’t. “Anything interesting?”

“There’s a ton of the usual distractions. Celebrities doing things. Getting together, breaking up. A few actresses are either having babies or ate more than they should have for breakfast and are having food babies. Depends on which magazine you read and which angles the photographs are from.” Phichit frowned and tapped his index finger against the glossy cover. “Every so often you can glean something useful, but it’s few and far between… Have you ever thought about asking Victor if there’s anything worth worry about going on in the country?”

“He tells me what he can, but it’s mostly the same things we go over in the meetings,” Yuri lowered his arms and shrugged. “I don’t press when he’s hesitant to talk to me about a specific topic. He’d probably tell me whatever I wanted to know if I pushed it, but I don’t want him to get in trouble. The last thing I want is for someone to have a valid reason to show me the door.”

“You don’t think there’s anyone out there that would really directly defy Victor’s obvious wishes and try to get you thrown out?” Phichit actually sounded concerned so Yuri offered him up a reassuring smile.

“There are eight media advisors total. I’m sure there’s at least one or two who wouldn’t mind seeing me go.” Yuri wasn’t even upset about it any longer. He had long made peace with the fact that no matter what he did there was always going to be at least one or two people that wanted to see him fail. It hadn’t been any different in any of the ballet companies he’d been with and he was certain it was the same here as well. “I’m not naïve and I’m not as oblivious as everyone seems to think I am. You haven’t noticed that I only get interviews whenever I’ve just come from being with Victor and they can’t avoid it? Or how they always put me at the end furthest from the camera when we have to do group segments?”

“I… I have not noticed. Shit, Yuri. That doesn’t sound fair.” Phichit sounded a lot more distraught about it than Yuri was. “Can’t you talk to someone about it. I’m sure Victor…”

“I’m not going to run to Victor every time something is a little unfair. Besides, it’s the not media advisors that are picking the prince’s husband. They can pull as many strings as they want. At the end of the day Victor is going to have the final say.” Yuri couldn’t hold back the slight grin that came with those words even if he’d wanted to. “It’s almost flattering that they think I’m some kind of
threat, really.”

“You’ve said it before, though. Whoever marries Victor is going to end up having the ear of the king one day.” Phichit pointed out. “Like it or not, that matters to some people.”

“I’m sure it does.”

“You are being surprisingly calm about all of this.” Phichit waved his hands back and forth in front of his face when Yuri arched an eyebrow in response. “Not that that’s a bad thing. If you aren’t worried about it, then that’s great! I just… I don’t know if I could be so calm is all.”

“Do you think I would try to use my position for my own gain? You know, if I even end up with that position in the first place.” He wasn’t sure why he’d asked that question, or even why it mattered so much to him to hear Phichit’s answer. But it did. It did matter. “You can be honest with me. We’re supposed to be best friends, right? Those were your words.”

“I really shouldn’t hate it when people use my words against me like that since I make it my mission in life to use other people’s words back against them, but…” Phichit let out a tense huff of air and Yuri waited out the ensuing silence with much more patience than he was really feeling. He even braced the palms of his hands on the floor behind him in the guise of stretching his back in order to hide how they were trembling slightly as he waited to see what, if anything, Phichit was going to say. “I don’t think you would. That’s just… That’s just not the person you are, but I’m not the one that requires convincing.”

“The only people whose opinion I care about is the Royal Family’s.” Yuri sat up straight and placed his hands in his lap, focusing on Phichit with his undivided attention for the first time since they’d arrived at the studio. “I know I’m not great at playing the game yet. I’m not sure if I ever will be, but I’m not alone. I’ve got you to help and Victor and even Yurio when he wants to. Usually if he wants something from me and is willing to strike a bargain, but that’s better than nothing… Why are you hugging me?”

And Phichit was hugging him. Tightly. Yuri wasn’t even sure when the other man had moved, it had mostly been kind of a blur, but his friend was definitely hugging him now however it had happened.

“Because I felt like it.” Phichit gave Yuri’s body another firm squeeze before he released him and scooted back to put a few meters of space between them. “You know… You’re so down on yourself all the time I don’t even think you know how brave you really are when you say these things.”
“I’m not being brave. I’m being practical.” Yuri stated firmly. “Well, I might also be a bit selfish, too. Phichit, I didn’t plan for any of this to happen. In fact, the second I found out I’d been Selected my first impulse was to run away. Then all I wanted to do once I got here was keep my head down and hold out for a few weeks to let the stipend payments stack up. I never in a million years thought I might catch Victor’s attention… I’m really still not even sure exactly how that happened… And even once I knew I had it, I wasn’t even sure I wanted it.”

“Now I do know what I want. It freaks me out sometimes to think about all those stupid ‘what ifs’. I’ve had several panic attacks just being here and my palms still go clammy and sweaty when we’re in a meeting or at one of the roundtable sessions and someone corrects me or pokes holes in one of my suggestions.” Yuri bit at his bottom lip for a second before going on. It never had been easy for him to verbalize the mess that was his insecurities.

“It’s hard when Chris or Georgi will have the answer while I’m still trying to figure out the question or when JJ will take over whatever event we’re supposed to be planning when he notices I’m hesitating about something or trying to work something out in my head. It’s hard to be constantly reminded that I have a lot to learn if I want to be worthy of being chosen, but I can’t quit. I can’t give up. It’s like… It’s like when I wanted to dance and I worked until my ankles were swollen and my feet bled. I powered through muscles cramps and strains and broken blisters that made it feel like I was dancing on shards of glass. I scrimped and saved and skipped meals so I could afford the bus fare to get into town and I would spend hours scrubbing floors and folding costumes so I could get just an hour of private time with our instructors, but even though it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done until now, I didn’t give up because I wanted it.”

“I want this, too. Maybe even just as bad.”

There was a long beat of silence after Yuri stopped speaking and he could feel the heat rising in his cheeks and the back of his neck. It was one thing to know Phichit was a friend, and another entirely to lay all that on him at one time… Although, Yuri did have to admit he felt a fair bit lighter for having been able to say it out loud.

“Have you… You haven’t said all of that to Victor, yet?” Phichit cleared his throat before he asked the question, but he wasn’t looking upset, which helped calm some of Yuri’s nerves. "Actually... I guess you haven't."

“How do you know I haven’t?” Yuri countered.

“Because we’re planning a Christmas party with the queen and not a wedding.” Phichit laughed weakly. “I have the feeling that if you lay it all out to Victor like you just did with me, we’ll be walking you to the altar the next day. He seems to be the kind to like heartfelt, grand declarations.”
“I’ve told him some of it.” That much was true. “As for the rest of it… I’ve barely even told myself.”

“I get that.” Yuri hadn’t expected Phichit to agree and the other man shrugged when Yuri sent him a surprised look. “The human brain is a complex place, man. I get it.”

“It’s that and other things.” Now it was Yuri’s turn to shrug. “Can we talk about something more upbeat?”

“Sure!” Phichit changed tracks instantly, which was good. Yuri had almost expected to have to put up a fight. Perhaps it was more obvious to Phichit than Yuri thought it was. How raw his new revelations were. How Yuri was still trying to figure out himself what it all meant and what he was going to have to do about it. “Wanna look at these paparazzi photos of actresses and see which ones look pregnant?”

“I actually came here to dance, but you if want to do that, don’t let me stop you.” Yuri pushed back up to his feet. He started walking towards the corner of the room where his music player was already hooked up to the sound system and ready to go. “Do you mind if I play some music?”

“Go right ahead.” Phichit rolled up his magazine and shoved it under a nearby mat. “Hmmmmm…”

“Hmmm, what?” Yuri pressed play and his classical music playlist started. He fiddled for a moment with the volume, trying to make sure it was loud enough that he would be able to keep to a beat, but still low enough that he would be able to hear and respond to Phichit if needed.

“Have you ever thought of choreographing a dance for Victor?” Phichit asked. “I bet he’d like it. I’d bet he’d like it a lot.”

“I… The thought might have crossed my mind once or twice.” That was definitely the truth. After he’d seen the way Victor had reacted to his dancing before, the idea wouldn’t leave him alone, actually. Just thinking about what he’d been able to do with something that had never really been intended for Victor in the first place had him wondering what the prince would do if Yuri came up with something directed towards him on purpose. “I don’t know. I’ve been feeling kind of blocked lately. Probably all those stupid facts about crop yields blocking my creativity.”

“Well, don’t let me tell you how to live your life, but…” Phichit had what Yuri could only have described as a shit-eating grin on his face. “If you can’t think of something new, I don’t think Victor
would mind having a repeat performance of that other piece… A private performance perhaps?”

Yuri tried to cover up where he’d tripped over his own two feet by gliding into a set of tight turns. He didn’t even bother to look and see if Phichit had noticed or not as he came to a stop and raised his arms over his head. “If that ever happens, you will be the last to know.”

“That’s not fair. I’m your best friend! I get first dibs always. That’s how this works.” Phichit stuck his tongue out in Yuri’s direction. A gesture Yuri ignored as he went to step into the first movement of one of his more familiar dances just to warm up.

Phichit fell silent as Yuri worked his way through the jumps and steps and spins. It was an easier dance, something he’d used on and off since he was probably ten just to warm up his muscles and get in the right mindset for something more complex, but he could tell Phichit was watching him as closely as if he’d been dancing on a stage in full costume. As if he was dancing the most difficult piece of his life instead of something that was intended to teach new dancers how to string together bits of piece of the basics into something that flowed.

He knew that feeling, though. He’d been there before, the first time he’d set foot in the studio where he’d taken his first lessons. He remembered walking through the doors with his tiny hand held tightly in his mother’s reassuring grasp and seeing some older boys working on something with an instructor in one of those large, wood-floored rooms. For the rest of his life he would never forget watching them that morning and the way that they moved. It had been with a kind of reverent awe and he distinctly remembered knowing he wanted to be able to inspire that feeling in someone else one day.

Yuri came to a stop in the middle of the room as the music shifted to a different piece. He was barely breathing hard at all, but he still took a moment to breathe in deeply and re-center himself before decided what he was going to move onto next.

“Have you ever thought of choreographing a duet?” Phichit asked curiously.

“In abstract terms, I guess.” Yuri shrugged his right shoulder as he stretched out his left arm to the side, getting ready to start something new. “If I had decided to be a choreographer once I was done dancing I’m sure I would have.”

“Have you ever thought about choreographing a duet for you and Victor?”

Yuri paused, ignoring his cue in the music to begin.
Now there was an idea…

~

“You seem distracted today.”

“Hmm? Do I?”

Yuri nodded in response to Victor’s question, forgetting for a moment that with them lying on their backs and looking up at the sky that Victor likely wouldn’t have seen the gesture.

In lieu of being able to find a better place for a quiet moment alone, they had taken to coming out to Victor’s secret spot in the garden. Yuri usually under the guise of walking Makkachin and Victor… Well, Yuri wasn’t entirely sure how Victor managed to get out undetected, but he was very rarely late and had yet to not show at all.

Yuri shifted around on the blanket they had laid out on the grass in front of the bench so that he was lying on side instead of his back. It made it a lot easier to focus on Victor’s profile that way and Yuri reached out to give Makkachin a lazy pet from where the dog was spread out between them with his eyes closed and his big head resting on his paws.

“Yes, you do.” While it wasn’t necessarily odd for them to spend time together in nothing more than companionable silence, today felt different in a way that was difficult for Yuri to put his finger on. It was like Victor was further away than usual, wrapped inside his own mind and thoughts that Yuri couldn’t see. “Did you… Is there something you want to talk about…? Or, not talk about?”

“I can’t hide anything from you, can I, Yuri?” Even though Victor still kept his gaze looking up and into the thick canopy of branches above them, Yuri could see the smile tug at his lips. His tone of voice didn’t sound as though he was upset either, and Yuri relaxed a fraction at that. “It nothing new. Nothing I didn’t already know. I just didn’t expect to have them put so much pressure on me so soon.”

“Oh.” Yuri blinked slowly as he tried to parse through such a vague statement without coming up with anything of substance. “That’s… Not a lot of information, Victor.”
“No, it’s not.” Victor let out a low sigh and rolled over as well so they were able to look at each other over Makkachin’s shoulders. “The media advisors. They want me to make a big deal about sending another one or two Elite home. They were not exactly thrilled that the last two to leave left under their own power and they didn’t get their dramatic footage of me requesting they go home. That, and they want to cut it down from eight to hopefully three or four before Christmas.”

“Ah…” Yuri did understand Victor’s introspection now. “You don’t have to talk about it with me if you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to…”

“Victor, I get it. I am part of the competition, after all.” Yuri shrugged easily as he ran his fingers through Makkachin’s thick coat.

“There isn’t any competition.” Victor stated firmly as he slid his own fingers into the poodle’s fur, brushing his fingertips against Yuri’s as he did so. “There hasn’t been for a long time, and you know it. That still doesn’t mean I enjoy sending people home. It can be difficult. Particularly when so many that are left can be counted as friends and allies at this point. And, I don’t know… They’re your friends, too. I didn’t think you would want to hear me go back and forth about who I might want to ask to leave.”

“I understand. I don’t really want to see any of them go home either…” Yuri was actually kind of surprised at how true that statement was. He really didn’t want to see anyone currently there go home. Not even JJ, whose arrogance had tempered somewhat over the past month or so making him much easier to get along with overall.

Victor nodded solemnly. “I guess it’s too much to hope that one or two of them will come to me and just ask to leave like Michele and Seung-Gil did.”

“Maybe they’re too nervous to ask?” Yuri suggested hesitantly. “They made it pretty clear when we were given our contracts before even coming here that it was frowned upon to remove ourselves from the Selection. I can see how someone like Michele or Seung-Gil wouldn’t care about asking you for a favor in private, but I can also see how some of the others might be hesitant to potentially break a rule…”

“Someone really said that?” Victor asked, and it was clear that he was truly surprised.
“Yes. For me it was Mila, but I would assume she didn’t have enough time to jet around the entire
country in the few weeks we had before coming here, so it might have been someone else for the
others, but I’d bet the speech was about the same.” Yuri propped himself up on his left elbow, right
hand still running through Makkachin’s coat, fingertips brushing Victor’s every so often. “What? Did
you think they would have sent us here without telling us the rules first?”

“No, I knew Mila and Celestino went out to talk to all the Selected, but I didn’t think either of them
would tell you that you didn’t have the right to ask me to leave if you wanted to.” Victor frowned.
The deep one that caused a furrow across his brow that always caused Yuri to want to instinctively
reach out and smooth it away. “I don’t… I didn’t want… Yuri, you don’t feel trapped here, do you?”

“A little, at first.” Yuri wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to admit that at all, but he had yet to refuse to
give Victor the truth whenever he asked a point-blank question like that and he didn’t exactly want to
start now. “It helped once we ended up on an established schedule. I’m used to schedules and being
where I’m supposed to be when I’m supposed to be there.”

“You don’t… You don’t still feel trapped, do you?” When Victor tangled his fingers in Yuri’s across
Makkachin’s back, Yuri held on just as tight.

“Sometimes.” When Victor’s face literally crumpled, Yuri rushed to elaborate. “Not in any important
way. Just with little things. Like… Like sometimes I’ll crave the hamburgers from a stand that used
to be down the road from the dorms I lived in. Whenever I got that craving before I would just walk
down the street and get one as soon as I had some free time. Now when I think about it, I can’t just
hop in a car and go get one, but it’s not so bad. It’ll just take some more adjustment and I’m sure…”

“Oh…” Victor looked less upset, but Yuri could tell there was still something bothering him. That he
still wasn’t completely relaxed. “If you want something all you have to do is ask. I’m sure we can
send someone…”

“That’s not the point.” Yuri sighed heavily and pulled Victor’s hand closer to his side of the dog
barrier. “I’m not used to having to ask permission. For the past five years, I was on my own. As long
as I made it to practices and shows on time, the hours in between were mine to do whatever I wanted
with. I can’t do that here, and it’s not a bad thing. It’s just a different feeling. It takes some getting
used to and it can feel stifling sometimes.”

“You’re not saying that solely to make me feel better, are you?” Even as Victor asked the question
he squeezed Yuri’s hand and smiled at him warmly. Almost like he already knew the answer, but
still hoped Yuri would give it to him out loud anyway. “You still want to be here?”
“Do you still want me to be here?” He was teasing and he could tell from the spark of recognition in Victor’s eyes that he knew it, too.

“Hmm… Only if you want to be here.”

“There’s no place I’d rather be.”

This time Victor didn’t even ask if he meant it.

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When Yuri couldn’t go out to the dance studio, or when he’d been out there too often and he could feel his muscles protesting against any further use, Yuri had found an acceptable sanctuary in the library. It was technically one of the public rooms available for use by anyone in the palace at any time, but it was typically fairly empty for the most part. Even when it wasn’t, the people coming and going kept to themselves and left him alone.

Well, everyone except the other Elite, who always seemed to perk up and head his way whenever they entered the room and found him there. Yuri supposed it was better than when the Selected used to go out of their way to avoid and ignore him, but there were times when he rather preferred to be left in peace.

Of course, when he really wanted to be undisturbed he could go to his room… But it was a lot harder for Victor to find him there if he got a spare second away without making it look like they were trying to sneak around again…

“Oh, Yuri. I didn’t know you were here.”

Unfortunately for Yuri, only about one out of ten times he was interrupted in the library was it ever Victor. Though, out of everyone it could have been, Georgi wasn’t usually too bad. He never really hung around for long in any case.

“Yeah, I spent some time in the dance studio this morning with Yurio so I figured my knee might prefer studying over exercising this evening.” It was a good excuse and close enough to the truth. Yuri’s knee did hurt a bit and he did need to study for the meeting they were going to attend in the morning. “How are you?”
“Fine. Wanted to return a book I borrowed the other day. If I don’t return it as soon as I’m done my attendants have an odd habit of trying to put books away with my things instead of where they really belong.” Georgi shook his head and let out a dramatic sigh as he walked across the room and placed a book back in an empty slot on a shelf. “If they aren’t careful, I’ll end up taking home half the library when I leave.”

There was an awkward silence after Georgi had finished speaking. Or, it was awkward on Yuri’s end at least. Georgi didn’t look uncomfortable or upset at all.

“You know it doesn’t really bother me anymore… Going home, that is.” His book properly stored, Georgi came and sat down into the open armchair across from the one where Yuri was sitting with his notes and paperwork spread across his lap. “I’m not too sure about everyone else, but I really don’t mind. I’ve already figured out when I came here to figure out, so…”

“Oh?” Yuri was curious. Very curious. He was actually a naturally very curious person, even though he was almost always too polite to ever act on that curiosity. Now seemed to be one of those rare times when he was just the right amount of curious, caught off-guard, and lax enough not to check his reactions or expressions.

“It’s okay. You can ask. I know you want to, and I wouldn’t have said it if I minded any follow-up questions.” Georgi smiled and settled deeper into his chair. “You want to know what I was trying to sort through? Why I came here and why I’m so sure I’m ready to go?”

“I… Um… Yes.” Yuri stuffed the loose papers into his notebook and closed it on them. With that done, he turned his full attention to where Georgi was waiting patiently. “Yes. I’m interested in hearing it, if you’re interest in sharing.”

“I could be.” Georgi shrugged as Yuri narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “You have good instincts, but don’t worry, Yuri. I’ll be gone soon, Friday morning to be exact, and I won’t tell a soul whatever we discuss before I go… But I will want for you to answer the same questions in return to make it an equal exchange. Why did you come here? What were your reasons? If you want to know why I’m ready to leave, why are you ready to stay?”

“That sounds… Fair.” Yuri responded with a hint of caution. It did, too. Yuri had to admit that it was a very fair proposal. He also believed Georgi when the other man said he was about to leave and Yuri more or less trusted he wouldn’t say anything to anyone else on his way out.
Not that it really mattered. Yuri was bound and determined to stay no matter what happened or what anyone else thought. What was the point of pretending his mind wasn’t made up when it very clearly was?

His decision made, Yuri nodded. “Fine. I’ll answer your questions if you answer mine.”

“Perfect.” Georgi grinned. “I supposed it’s only fair if I go first since I started this. What do you want to know first? Why I decided to come?”

“That seems as good a place to start as any.” Yuri agreed amiably. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was going to say once that question was turned on him. So far, only Victor and Phichit knew anything about that and even they didn’t have the full scope of the desperation Yuri had felt when he made that particular decision. “Why did you decide to fill out that application? Why did you decide to come here?”

“I was escaping, to be honest.” There was a flash of something in Georgi’s dark eyes, but it was gone before Yuri could parse out what it even was, much less what it might have meant. “Escaping a lot of things really, but mostly escaping a broken heart.”

Yuri didn’t know what to say to that and Georgi could obviously tell as he let out a flat bark of laughter and went on.

“Don’t look so surprised. I’m sure I’m not the only one around here with some kind of tragic romantic backstory.” This time Georgi’s smile was a little less smug and a little more real. “Ask anyone from home. I tend to have a bad habit of throwing away my heart too often and far too soon once I do find someone to latch onto. My brothers even tried to warn me this time, they could see where she was going to take me from a mile away. Of course, I didn’t listen. I was in love with the idea of being in love and I was tired of waiting for that love to come find me. I was ready for it, she was not.”

“She broke up with me a week before I got the application for the Selection. I have to admit that even I saw it coming by that point. She had ambitions and I didn’t. It’s hard to measure up to already successful older brothers and Erik does have a rather cushy position in our local government with aspirations for more that I do not share.” Georgi looked serious and Yuri tried to keep his own face as neutral as possible. “Getting that letter was like a godsend in more ways than one. Actually getting Selected? That was like someone answered my prayers. It is kind of hard to get over your ex when she keeps showing up on the arm of your brother to Sunday dinners with the family.”

“That’s… That’s awful.” Even as he said the words, Yuri knew they would most likely be viewed as
nothing more than a platitude, something to fill the empty space between them. Something to say just for the sake of having something to say. Even though he knew that was how they would be viewed, Yuri still said them anyway. Because it was. It was awful. “I know you probably don’t want to hear it from me, but I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind hearing that anymore. Especially not from you.” The sad smile was back on Georgi’s face, but Yuri did notice that there was an air of something almost hopeful in the other man’s demeanor. “You really are an empathetic person, Yuri. That’s a good thing, too. Don’t let anyone ever try to convince you otherwise. Because they will. That’s the nature of the political beast.”

“I’ve noticed.” Yuri stated grimly. He had noticed it more and more as they were whittled down to a smaller and smaller group. The way the media advisors gave increasingly less subtle reminders to stay on script during live segments of The Report. The way their recorded interviews lasted longer and covered more topics in the hopes of being able to have a host of approved segments ready and waiting to run.

No one explained themselves in so many words. No one took him aside and gave him a carefully prepared speech about keeping a certain public image. If Yuri was willing to be honest with himself, he would have to say the lack of stern warning directed at him was as calculated as everything else around the palace was.

He noticed it all anyway.

“You’re pretty good at letting it all roll off you when you need it to. I never was. My brothers used to tease me when I was younger about how I felt things too deeply. That I was broken because I took everything seriously and took everything to heart. It took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that I wasn’t the broken one. They were.” Georgi took a deep breath before continuing. “Anyway. That’s what I was running from, but I was also running towards something as well.”

“You were?” Yuri asked.

“You weren’t?” Georgi shot back, though his tone did sound more amused than accusatory.

Yuri shuffled around in his seat, fingers clenching and unclenching around the edges of his notebook. “I wasn’t exactly sure what I was running towards. Nothing… Nothing has been at all what I expected.”
“You’re right. I don’t think anyone could have expected Victor. He’s not at all like what the news makes him out to be.” At that statement, Yuri couldn’t help but laugh. That was an understatement if he’d ever heard one and Georgi seemed to agree. “You’re probably the one that knows that best of all, though, so I suppose I shouldn’t have to tell you.”

“I wanted to know where I could go to move on from where I was.” That much was easy enough for Yuri to admit. “I didn’t even think I’d be Selected, but it was as good a first step as any. Whether I made the cut or not, at least I was doing something other than sit around and feel sorry for myself.”

“I know that feeling.” Georgi moved to rest his chin in his right hand. “I hoped there might be love at the end of this journey. I wasn’t wrong either. I think there is love here, it’s just not meant for me.”

That was a little too close to things Yuri didn’t even want to think to himself, much less say out loud in front of anyone else, so he didn’t say anything. He just waited patiently for Georgi to get the hint that he was treading in territory that wasn’t meant for him.

“Right. I didn’t think you’d give me a response to that, but I had to try. Can you blame me? You’re the most tight-lipped person here. It’s enough to make even the maids curious about what you’re thinking sometimes.” Georgi didn’t exactly look sorry for asking, but since he also didn’t look like he was about to press the subject either, Yuri didn’t say anything and let him go on. “Well, that’s why I’m ready to go home. I came here to see if there was a chance that I could find the love I was looking for here, and it’s obvious I’m not going to.”

Yuri wanted to say something reassuring, but everything he could come up with sounded too cliché, even inside his own head. Something told him that ‘I’m sure you’ll find someone eventually’ wasn’t going to go over too well even if Yuri meant every word of it.

“So now that you know why I’m ready to go, do you want to tell me why you’ve decided to stay?” Even though he had suspected that question was still coming, Yuri wasn’t sure he had a response to it just yet, but he was going to have to try. He’d made a deal and even though he theoretically could literally get up and walk away and Georgi wouldn’t have a lot of recourse to go after him and make him talk, that didn’t feel right.

“It’s a mix of reasons.” Yuri started off with the truth. It was a mix of reasons. A mix of reasons he didn’t understand half the time. “I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I do know I want to stay here until I figure it out.”

“There are a lot of people that are worried you are going to marry the prince.” Georgi stated idly, as though he was reading the weather report or commenting on what he would prefer for breakfast in
the morning. “I might not want to go into politics for myself, but I know enough to listen in when I can, especially when others might think I’m not paying attention. You worry a lot of people in high places. Something about you being ‘unpredictable’ and not liable to be easily controlled. It’s not hard to see that you’ve got the ear of the prince, too.”

“And they’re concerned about what I could do with it if I got it in my head to do so.” Yuri finished the thought before Georgi could get the chance. “They shouldn’t be. I was a dancer. I don’t know the first thing about political activism and I wouldn’t use Victor for my own gain even if I did. Of course, they wouldn’t believe that even if I told them.”

“No, I don’t think they would.” Georgi shrugged. “I also don’t think they are worried about you using him for your own gain. I think they’re more worried about your empathy. About other people using you to get to Victor by playing to your emotions. Of course, if they actually bothered to pay any attention to you, they would know that you wouldn’t ask for favors on anyone else’s behalf either.”

“You will, however, do what you feel is the right thing if it comes down to it. They should be afraid of that much more.” As Georgi said that Yuri shifted around nervously in his chair, not quite sure how to take that. He was sure it was meant to be a compliment, but he wasn’t entirely sure if he knew exactly how. “Don’t change, Yuri Katsuki. That would be my advice for you. The longer you stay here, the more they are going to want you to change. It’ll be in ways that are obvious and not so obvious, but don’t listen to them. You caught the prince’s eye by being exactly who you are now. Don’t let them take that away from you.”

“That’s… That’s good advice. Thank you.” Yuri smiled warmly. “I’m sorry I didn’t spend more time with you…”

“You’ve been busy and distracted. I don’t blame you at all.” Georgi pushed himself up to his feet. “I don’t think I would mind if you ended up being our Royal Consort one bit.”

“Hey, Georgi?” Yuri stopped the other man as he turned to go. When all he received in response was a raised eyebrow he went on. “I know you said you weren’t interested, but for what’s it’s worth, I think you would make an excellent politician if you wanted… For all the reasons others said you wouldn’t be. Maybe it’s the system that’s broken, not people like you.”

“Maybe you’re right.” With that, Georgi left and Yuri let him go.

He had been given a lot more to think about, that was for sure.
True to his word, Georgi went home a few days later on Friday. The camera crew made a big deal out of it, too. If Yuri hadn’t known it was going to happen in advance he would have been just as worried as everyone else when Victor called Georgi away for a chat in private after breakfast.

The only other person that didn’t seem surprised was Chris. Well, Chris and Phichit, who was surprised until Yuri caved about thirty seconds after Georgi had left and Phichit pulled him into an empty room in order to grill him on why he seemed so calm when everyone else was freaking out. Although, Yuri supposed that didn’t count as Phichit had been upset prior to Yuri telling him about the situation and calming him down.

“Yuri, you’re my best friend. I thought you promised to tell me everything about when you hang out with Victor!” Even though Georgi had left about four hours prior, Phichit was still hyped up about it and had followed Yuri out to the dance studio, ostensibly to be a second set of eyes as Yuri tried to work through a rough patch in some of his new choreography, but mostly to continue to gossip where they had a lower chance of being interrupted.

“I do tell you almost everything about my time with Victor.” Yuri protested. In fact, the only thing he hadn’t told Phichit about was a few days ago when they had been kissing out in the garden and Victor’s hand had ended up gripping Yuri’s ass, but that was mostly because he would rather crawl under a rock and die before telling Phichit that particular story. “I didn’t tell you this because Georgi was the one who told me, not Victor, and I didn’t think it was my story to tell.”

“Since when do you hang out with Georgi? Should I be worried about you cheating on me with a new best friend?” Phichit pouted until Yuri let out a terse sigh and shook his head. “Good, because I worked too hard to have you leave me now.”

“Did you know that sometimes you’re clingier than Victor? That’s not necessarily a good thing, by the way.” Yuri stated blandly as he grabbed a towel from out of his bag and wiped some of the seat from off his face. At least Phichit had waited until he was done working and was ready to begin his cool down to start chattering at him. “I don’t know why he told me and I didn’t think to ask.”

“Okay, I’ll let it go this time, but I’m going to keep a close eye on you in the future.” Phichit threatened in a teasing tone of voice as Yuri tried to keep his expression stern while battling down the smile curling at the edges of his lips. “Speaking of Victor, he’s been in a mood lately, too.”
“They’re pressuring him to make more cuts.” Yuri stowed his towel back in his bag and dropped to the floor in order to begin stretching out his legs. “He suspects they are going to want him to be ready to make a final decision at the Christmas Ball.”

“Make sense. About three-fourths of the country already tunes into the live broadcast of the ball anyway, so free publicity. Romantic setting. A chance to get the families of whoever is left back here so they can see the proposal in person. What more could they ask for?” Phichit rolled Yuri’s water bottle closer to him and Yuri picked it up with a grateful nod of his head. “Are you nervous about it?”

“When am I not nervous about something?” Yuri took a deep gulp from his bottle and set it to the side, relaxing into where he had his right leg stretch out in front of him and wrapping his hands around his ankle. “I try not to think about it and Victor’s only ever mentioned it the one time.”

“Yuri, best friend, light of my life… You’ve got to give me more than that!” Phichit slapped the palms of his hands against the floor to punctuate his complaint, but Yuri didn’t even look up at him, instead he remained focus on the leg outstretched in front of him. “You know, it might help if you talk it out with someone.”

“It might.” Yuri admitted as he sat up and switched legs. “Phichit, it’s months away. I have plenty of time to build up a healthy amount of panic for you to talk me down from.”

“It’s almost October.”

“Don’t remind me.” Yuri groaned as he sat back up and shot Phichit a glare. “I am painfully aware of what the date is.”

“Fine, fine. We don’t have to talk about that right now, but we are going to talk about it eventually.” Phichit tucked his legs underneath himself and popped up to his feet. “I wonder if anyone hid any of the new magazines around here…”

“You’re all going to get caught and sent home if you keep that up.” Yuri warned, happy about the change of topic, but not exactly thrilled that Phichit might try to shove another magazine with photos of Victor with the Elite taken from the many press releases that the media advisors sent out on a weekly basis.

“Maybe.” Phichit shrugged, but continued over to conduct a search of the equipment closet where
Yurio kept the fencing equipment anyway. “You should get used to this, by the way. The seeing yourself cuddling up to Victor in magazines thing.”

“You seem awfully confident that I’m going to accept Victor’s proposal… If I’m even the one he ends up proposing to.” Yuri stretched both legs out in front of him and bent over so that his forehead was touching his knees and he was staring at the fabric of his navy leggings.

He still somehow managed to feel Phichit’s disbelieving stare.

“The only way that man is not proposing to you is if you tell him not to.” Phichit’s voice sounded closer and Yuri resolutely continued to stare straight down instead of looking back up. “Are you seriously telling me right now that there is some universe where you suffer temporary insanity long enough to actually say ‘no’ to him?”

“I’m not saying that such a universe couldn’t exist.” Yuri grumbled into his knee caps before exhaling sharply and sitting up, meeting Phichit’s accusatory stare with a shrug. “Yes, I know, that’s definitely not this universe. I just… Before it happens, I know I’m going to have to talk to him about it and I’m not ready to do that yet. I don’t think he is either. He never brings it up in anything more than vague terms in any case.”

“You could bring it up if you really wanted to. Just saying.” Phichit spun around and stalked back to the closet. “Besides, anyone who’s anyone can’t deny that the two of you make an adorable couple. Not to mention the fact that he seems absolutely devoted to you and you seem pretty devoted to him in return. Shit, you spent most of last night underneath a math textbook and a pile of economic reports. You can’t seriously say you didn’t do that because you are harboring thoughts that this might end up in any way for you other than wedding bells.”

“It never hurts to be prepared.” Yuri placed his hands against the floor behind him and braced himself against them, stretching his back into a small arch. “Victor’s not the one I have to convince that I’m good enough to take the position.”

“You know he’s not going to listen to a word anyone else says…”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t going to talk.” Yuri stated plainly. “I just don’t want them to be right. I couldn’t live with myself if they were regardless of what Victor thinks.”

Phichit stopped rifling around in the closet and turned back to Yuri with a frown on his face and his
brow furrowed. “That sounds a lot like your anxiety talking.”

Yuri let out a noncommittal grunt in response and Phichit left it alone from there, allowing Yuri to finish stretching in peace. For all Phichit’s poking and prodding, he did seem to know when to leave something well enough alone and Yuri reveled in the silence for a long moment as he pulled out of his last stretch and grabbed his bottle and bag as he got to his feet.

“Ready to go get dressed for dinner?” Yuri asked in order to raise the white flag and let Phichit know he was ready to talk again.

“Sure. There’s nothing new here anyway.” Phichit shoved something back into the closet and closed it before bouncing back over to where Yuri was now waiting by the door that led outside. “Do you think if I asked Yurio, he would find a way to slip me the copies directly?”

“Depends. How much do the powers that be not want you to have them?” Yuri asked as he opened the door and tugged his bag up over his right shoulder. “He’s a lot more amenable to requests that require him to thumb his nose at the establishment.”

“Hmmm… Look at you, using fancy words like ‘amenable’ correctly in a sentence. You have been studying.” Phichit poked Yuri in the side as they stepped out into the chilly air.

“Reading gives me something to do when I can’t sleep.” Yuri did not say that he was having more and more of those sleepless night lately. He figured it went without saying and was too close to opening the door for Phichit to bring up their earlier conversation again. “It also helps that it seems to be Chloe’s favorite word lately. It’s like every time Yakov or Victor floats a change to the treaty out there, she’s sure the Queen will be ‘amenable’ to those changes… You know, if we give them access to some shipping lane or another in return.”

“Ah, treaty negotiations… That is something I am decidedly not going to miss once I get to go back home eventually.” Phichit rolled his shoulders back and stretched his arms over his head until something in his back popped. “I would rather take Mrs. Kimber’s calculus class fifty more times than sit through another one of those meetings… I know you don’t know Mrs. Kimber, or much about calculus, but trust me when I say it was not a pleasant experience for either of us.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Yuri opened the door for them to step back into the palace and fell back into step with his friend as they made their way through the twisting corridors and towards the back stairwell which would take them back to their rooms. “You’re going to keep in touch with me once you go back home, right?”
“Duh. That’s what best friends do.” Phichit nudged him with his own shoulder and they exchanged grins. “You don’t really think you’re going to be able to get rid of me that easily, do you?”

Yuri did not think Phichit was going to be easy to get rid of, and he was going to say something to that effect, too, when they turned a corner and almost ran right into where Yakov, Victor, and Chris were standing in the hallway arguing about something under their breaths.

“You can’t keep sweeping it under the rug! If you do you know it’s only going to keep getting worse.” Even though Chris was trying to keep his voice down, he was angry enough that his forceful words carried and both Yuri and Phichit froze in their tracks. “When are you both going to stop pretending nothing is going on and start actually helping?”

“Chris, stop. Not here.” Victor placed a hand on Chris’ shoulder which was violently shrugged off. “Chris!”

Seeming to notice that both Victor and his father were now looking down the hall at where Phichit and Yuri had slowly started to inch backward, Chris turned to look in the same direction, his eyes widening as he saw them as well.

“Fine. Not now.” Chris straightened up some and stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Soon, Victor. You can’t put me off forever.”

Then Chris was gone, stomping off down the hall in the opposite direction and disappearing up the staircase leading to the second floor leaving the four that had been left behind in an awkward silence.

“Victor…” The king shot his son a stern look.

“I know, Father. I’ll handle it.” Victor sounded tired and Yuri could tell even from half a hall away that his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You’d better. I don’t want to hear anything more about this.” Yakov gave Victor one last warning glare before excusing himself, pushing past Yuri and Phichit without a word of explanation.

“I’m, um… I’m going to go.” Phichit took a hesitant step forward. “I’ll see you guys at dinner?”
“Uh, yeah. Yeah, see you at dinner.” Yuri echoed weakly, offering up a small wave as Phichit stumbled down the hall and up the stairs where Chris had just disappeared. As soon as Yuri was sure he was gone, he took a few steps towards Victor, biting back a sigh of relief when the other man not only didn’t walk away, but also took a few steps towards Yuri in return. “Victor…”

“Yuri.” Victor held open his arms and Yuri fell into them eagerly. He knew that whenever Victor was tense about something it helped when Yuri would hug him so he let his bag drop off his shoulder and onto the floor and he wrapped his arms around Victor’s waist, resting his head against the taller man’s chest. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“Don’t worry about me. Is everything okay with you?” Yuri tilted his head so that he could speak without Victor’s shirt muffling the words and Victor tightened his grip a fraction as Yuri moved, almost as though he was worried Yuri might try to pull away. “Victor, I’m not going anywhere. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine. It’s… It’s not a new argument, though it is the first time he’s been brave enough to bring it up in front of Father.” Victor loosened his grip enough so that Yuri could pull back and look up into his face. “Chris is… Well, he’s upset. It’ll blow over.”

“Are things… Are thing worse back home, in his district?” Yuri wasn’t sure if he should ask, but when Victor didn’t immediately deny it or push it away, it gave Yuri courage to continue. “He said there were issues with curfews and… Other things…”

“That is part of it, yes.” Victor admitted. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.” Yuri was always quick to let Victor off the hook, not wanting to press or make the prince commit to talk about something he wasn’t ready to talk about.

“That’s the problem. I do want to tell you. I want to tell you everything. It’s stupid and frustrating that I can’t.” Victor bit his bottom lip and ran his eyes over Yuri’s face as though he was searching for something. As though the answers to his questions could be found there and nowhere else. “Yuri… Can you meet me in the garden tomorrow night after everyone else goes to bed? Do you… Do you think you can get out there without being seen?”

“I… I think I can.” Yuri wasn’t entirely sure, but he knew the guards would leave some of the back doors unguarded while they went on their rounds and he was fairly confident that he had their
patterns memorized enough to squeeze out for a minute or two without being seen. “Why?”

“I want to tell you everything, but there’s something I have to show you first and I’m going to need a day to prepare.” Victor lifted a hand in order to cup Yuri’s jaw. “Tomorrow night? Around ten? By our fountain?”

“I’ll be there.”
Trust

Chapter Notes

I'm soooo close to getting all the comments responded to... But I have an early morning training and it's getting late and I need sleep or else I'm going to fall out of my chair tomorrow so... Update first, finishing comments when I'm supposed to be training tomorrow! Hahaha.

For any readers in Florida or any other those other areas Irma dropped down on: Stay safe and know we are with you!

For me, life is getting back to normal. We've got our electric back after only a few days without. I've spent a lot of times doing some volunteer work in the area so that explains some of the delay with getting that chapter out. Plus, Monroe and I have a competition this Sunday the 17th we're preparing for so that's taking up time. It'll be the first time we've competed since March with all the craziness that was going on in my life so I'm super excited to get her back out there!

Also, this chapter is huge... They just... Keep getting bigger?

Thank you all for reading and commenting and sharing and leaving kudos! You're all the best!!

Chapter 24 – Trust

Yuri didn’t sleep well that night at all.

He was too on edge. Too wrapped up in trying to figure out what might have been going on. What he might be walking into by agreeing to meet with Victor the next night.

He didn’t have a lot to go on. Bits of a whispered conversation he hadn’t been meant to hear. The way Chris had stayed wrapped up in a conversation with Phichit throughout dinner and barely spoke a word to another person. The way he knew enough about Victor now to see the cracks in the polite mask he was wearing to get through the meal. How he knew the prince was miles away inside his own head even though no one else seemed to notice.

It didn’t help that Yakov had grabbed Victor the second the dinner plates had been cleared and drug him off behind closed doors for the rest of the night, effectively making sure he couldn’t have asked Victor for any more information even if he’d wanted to.
For the first time since his arrival at the palace all those months ago, Yuri was awake and puttering around the room aimlessly by the time Minako showed up ready to begin their morning routine. He was meandering back and forth in front of his window when the door opened and Minako took two steps into the room before stopping, the door swinging shut behind her with a muffled click.

“Oh, no… What’s wrong?”

“W-What? N-Nothing’s wrong.” Yuri was sure that his stuttering wasn’t convincing at all, but he also wasn’t entirely sure there even was anything wrong. Just the bad feeling that had finally pulled him from his tossing and turning about two hours ago and refused to let him even consider trying to sleep again.

“You’re awake and fully dressed before eight am. Something is wrong.” Minako rested her hands on her hips and leveled an impressive glare in his direction, but she didn’t step any closer. “You going to tell me what it is?”

“If I knew what it was I would tell you.” Yuri stated with a shrug for emphasis. “Probably just anxious for no reason.”

“I get the feeling that, while you are anxious often enough, it’s very rarely for no reason. That doesn’t mean it’s always for a good reason, but there definitely typically is one.” Minako narrowed her eyes even further as though she would be able to see into his head and glean his thoughts if she tried hard enough. “Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you or are we going to have to do this the hard way?”

Yuri was almost tempted to make a sarcastic comment about being perfectly fine with Minako trying to get anything out of him the hard way, but he stopped himself at the last second. It was probably best not to try his luck. Minako could actually be very scary when she wanted to be.

“It’s… It’s…” Yuri struggled to think of something that would seem big enough to have drawn him out of bed and set him to pacing before he was due to be awake, but that was far enough from the truth that he wouldn’t risk making Minako suspicious. Luckily, Minako was right about one thing. He had all kinds of reasons for being anxious, so it wasn’t hard to pick something from the tangled mess of his brain to present to her. “It’s probably just me worrying because Georgi went home. There’s only seven of us left now, you know.”

“I know.” Minako didn’t remove her hands from her hips and she still didn’t move. Yuri bit at the inside of his cheek and shuffled from side to side nervously under her fierce gaze. “People are going to continue to go home, too. I’m pretty sure you are more than aware by now that you are not going to be one of them.”
“I’m not worried about Victor sending me home.” Yuri shot back. He was worried about a lot of things on an almost daily basis, but that was something he hadn’t worried about in a long time. Victor wouldn’t send him home unless Yuri asked him to and that was not going to happen any time soon, if ever. “I’m worried about Christmas being only two and a half months away. I’m worried about running out of time.”

“Running out of time…” Minako softened some as she was obviously turning that statement over in her head. “Oh… Oh, that makes sense.”

“It does?” Yuri asked and then scrambled to cover up his confusion. “I mean. Of course, it does.”

“Uh-huh…” Minako was looking at him suspiciously and Yuri increased the pressure of his teeth against the inside of his cheek in to hope that the slight pain would help keep his face blank and his mind focused. “So that’s it? You’re worried about Christmas?”

“Yes.” Yuri stated a lot more firmly this time. “I’m worried about Christmas.”

“And running out of time?” Minako asked and Yuri nodded, although he was starting to become more and more confused. At least Minako was looking less suspicious and more exasperated. Yuri was fairly sure that was a good sign that she was going to eventually believe him. “I’m sure this is a stupid question and I normally wouldn’t ask it, but sometimes it’s hard to follow your train of thought and I want to make sure I’m understanding exactly what it is you’re freaking out about. Why do you think Christmas means that you’re running out of time?”

“You’re right. That was a stupid question.” Yuri huffed out a terse puff of air and let his body fall back to thunk against the wall behind him, letting it hold him up for the time being. “Why wouldn’t I think I was running out of time? This whole thing has to end eventually. It’s not like anyone is going to let it drag on forever.”

“Oh…” Minako shook her head and relaxed completely. “Is that really all?”

“Yes, that is really all.” Yuri frowned. Okay, so that might not have been what had been really bothering him right at that moment, but he certainly didn’t think it was any less of a looming concern. “I feel like you aren’t taking this as seriously as I am.”

“It’s not that I’m not taking it seriously… Alright, so maybe I’m not taking it as seriously as you
want me to be taking it, but I assure you that’s because I’m worried about something completely different.” Minako smiled softly. “I’m more worried about you. If you’re this worked up about it months out, then I am not looking forward to having to talk you back from the ledge several hundred times.”

“I don’t think there’s actually enough time for several hundred freak outs.” Yuri pointed out glumly. Though he didn’t quite believe himself even as he said it. His anxiety could be resourceful when it wanted to be and did not mind working overtime in the slightest, so that number wasn’t quite as ridiculous as he would have liked for it to be.

“We’ll see.” Her concern apparently abated for now, Minako strode across the room with her usual fluid grace. “For now, you should take it one day at a time. You aren’t going to do anyone any good if you are so exhausted you can barely function.”

“Yeah, I know.” Yuri was almost tempted to tell her to start bringing him chamomile tea in the evenings before bed, it had helped him in the past when he’d been looking for something that was on his diet plan to help him relax at night when he’d been new to the National Ballet, but he didn’t want to risk her poking her head in to check on him or retrieve the cup and find him missing. Maybe he’d think about asking for it if he was still having trouble sleeping after whatever Victor wanted to show him that night. If he was still around after that, that was.

“Yuri…” Minako must have been able to tell that he’d wandered back into the darker part of his thoughts again and Yuri pushed himself up off the wall he’d been leaning against and forced himself to put on one of his better performance smiles. “Are you sure you’re okay? If you need to take the morning to yourself I don’t think anyone would mind. You’ve been working hard lately…”

That was a tempting idea. Yuri could just hide in his room for most of the day. Avoid everyone. Not have to worry about trying to put on a cheery front when his mind wanted nothing more than to worry itself in circles. Unfortunately, Yuri knew himself better than that. The only thing that would happen if he stayed shut up in his room was a guaranteed panic attack. He’d been lucky so far to get away with only having a small one around three in the morning.

“I’m fine, but thank you for worrying about me.” Yuri waved off Minako’s concerned look as she went to open her mouth again. “I promise. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

Minako pursed her lips and let out a terse sigh, but he could tell he’d done enough to convince her for the time being.

“If you have trouble sleeping again, ring for me. I’ll find something to help you.” And that seemed to
be that, as Minako grabbed him by the elbow and drug him into the bathroom in order to finish getting him ready, rattling off his schedule for the day as she went.

Yuri let her obvious concern for him help keep his darker thoughts at bay as they finished their morning routine. In about fourteen hours he was going to have the answers to questions he hadn’t even thought to ask.

All he had to do was make it through the day.

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Breakfast had been an awkward affair from Yuri’s point of view, but it was easy to pass it off as him just being a bit tired. He never had been the most chipper in the mornings, and it helped that he was sitting next to JJ who had more than enough words to fill any spaces in the flow of conversation that Yuri left behind.

Victor seemed to be his bright and cheery self, though Yuri could tell there was something off about the other man. How Victor would shift ever so slightly in his seat whenever his eyes met Yuri’s from across the table. How his lips would twist downward for a split second when he would say something to Chris and the other man gave a succinct response before striking up a discussion with literally anyone else.

No one else seemed to have noticed, or, if they did, they didn’t comment on it or were much better at pretending there was nothing wrong than Yuri could ever hope to be.

There wasn’t anything scheduled for the morning, and Yuri had originally intended on spending more time in the library looking over some of the proposals for different charity events the Royal Family could take part in during the coming months. He even contemplated going through with his initial plan, too. He was sure Phichit, Leo, and Guang Hong would have gone with him to keep him company if he’d asked, which should be more than enough to keep him from retreating inside his own head.

As much as he knew he should, and as much as he did kind of want to, Yuri was still hesitant about it. The library was a nice, quiet space that often felt familiar and safe these days, but it could also be stifling. There weren’t a lot of windows and the tall shelves could loom just as well as comfort. It was a toss up as to whether he would be able to keep a hold on the frayed edges of his concentration or not.

“Oi, Katsuki!” Yuri had barely gotten three steps away from the table when Yurio’s shout drew his
attention and he stopped, turning around to find the blonde teen standing behind him with a scowl on his face. For a brief second Yuri tried to come up with something he could have done or said recently that would have put Yurio in such a mood, but he came up completely blank.

“Um… Yes?” Yuri responded hesitantly. He wasn’t at sure what Yurio wanted, and the room was emptying out quickly so the odds of someone rescuing him if the younger boy really was angry with him for some reason were dwindling as everyone else scattered.

“Are you doing anything this morning?” The way Yurio said it made it sound more like a statement than a question, but Yuri shook his head. “Good because you are now.”

“O-Okay.” Yuri agreed, though it didn’t seem as though Yurio was waiting for an answer as he was already heading towards the door at the back of the dining hall that would lead them outside.

He didn’t quite rush to follow the teenager, he was already pretty sure he knew exactly where Yurio was taking him after all, but he did extend his stride in order to make sure that the blonde ponytail in front of him didn’t get too far ahead.

Yuri shivered as the cooler fall air hit him the second they crossed the threshold. He spared a longing thought for the thick sweater he’d left hanging in his closet that morning, not thinking he was going to be heading outside for any reason before lunch. At least the dance studio wasn’t far away and he wrapped his arms around his chest in an effort to make a smaller target for the light breeze until they made it to their destination and he let out a huff of air in relief that someone had left the heater on and the room was already warm.

By now, Yuri knew better than to try to talk to Yurio immediately. Sometimes once they were done, Yurio would talk for a bit about whatever was bothering him, or he would at least give Yuri a tiny peek at some of the things that might be bothering him, but he would clam up completely if Yuri tried to start out with asking questions right away.

Yurio made his way to the equipment closet and started rummaging around in it while Yuri took slow, measured steps back to the curtained changing area. He’d started keeping a few changes of clothing in a cubbyhole he’d found there once it had become apparent that Yurio didn’t believe in asking Yuri if he was free in advance.

Yurio might not have cared about ripping his expensive trousers, but Yuri did. If only because Minako was the one that had to fix them and he’d rather skip out on any unnecessary lectures if at all possible.
He tugged his knee brace on as well, just for good measure. He could tell that Yurio was in a particularly volatile mood this time. The last thing he wanted was to end up back with the royal doctor trying to explain why he’d stupidly reinjured himself.

Yuri had been right. Yurio was in a rare mood. It was all he could do to stay on his own two feet after they’d warmed up and Yurio had pronounced them both ready to get serious.

But Yuri was better than he had been even just a month before and his stamina was almost back up to where it had been before he’d left the ballet between all the dancing, fencing, and running around the garden with Makkachin he’d been doing. That paired with his stubbornness and innate competitive nature meant that for once he was able to go until Yurio was the one to give out first.

“Shit. You must be feeling better.” Yurio managed to grumble out the words between his heavy breathes and Yuri pulled off his facemask and gave the younger boy a solid smirk before he flopped back against the nearest wall and began to move his sore right knee in and out in an effort to prevent it from seizing up. “You didn’t fucking hurt yourself, did you?”

“Nope.” Yuri bit the inside of his cheek in an effort to keep a pained wince from crossing his face as he bent down and began to work the tense muscles in his right calf with his fingers. “Just sore. I doubt it’ll ever not be sore after exercise.”

“Well, don’t fucking push it if you don’t have to.” Yurio frowned as he tugged off his equipment and tossed it to the floor. “You aren’t any use to me if you break yourself again.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Yuri responded idly. He’d spent more than enough time with the young prince over the past few months to know that gruff statements like that were about as close as Yurio ever came to showing concern. “I am feeling better, by the way. It almost feels normal for the most part… You know, until I start really using it, that is.”

Yurio grunted under his breath, but otherwise didn’t give any other response aside from sinking down onto the floor in order to start running through his own cool downs stretches. Yuri left him to it, taking off his own chest protector and moving to the barre to use its support. He was pretty sure if he ended up on the floor right about then, that he wasn’t going to be getting back up anytime soon.

The room was silent as they kept to their separate corners. This was usually the time when Yurio would say something if he did have anything to say. If not, they would spend the fifteen or so minutes of cooldown in companionable silence before Yurio would get up and stow their gear and Yuri would go grab his clothes from the changing area in order to make his way back to his room for a quick shower and to dump both sets of clothing.
“Do you have any idea why my idiot of an older brother needs to steal my guard away for the next two days?”

Yuri had actually almost given up on Yurio saying anything at all when he’d broken the silence. In fact, he’d been back pretty deep in his own head that he almost jerked his head up in surprise, barely aborting the motion at the last minute in an effort not to shut Yurio down.

“Huh?” Yuri blinked slowly as he tried to grab onto his scattered thoughts and bring himself back into the present. “Um… No, Victor hasn’t mentioned anything to me about needing any kind of guard for anything. He, um, he has Otabeck doing something for him?”

“It doesn’t happen often, but sometimes he’ll have Beka run an errand for him or what the fuck ever else. No one ever tells me what the fuck is going on around here.” Yurio grunted and heaved himself to his feet. “I knew he wouldn’t tell me shit, but I thought he might have told you something. Forget I asked.”

“He doesn’t tell me everything, you know.” Yuri pushed his sweaty bangs out of his eyes and narrowed them in a vain attempt to focus on Yurio’s face better without his glasses. “There’s a lot he either doesn’t tell me, or I’m just plain not allowed to know.”

“Yeah, but once you’ve married him, they won’t be able to hide behind that ‘need to know’ bullshit.” Yurio raised one shoulder in a shrug. “I’ll bet the poor sap will tell you everything that goes through that thick skull of his whether you want to hear it or not.”

Yuri felt his cheeks heat despite his best efforts to stop it. “Yeah, well, who knows when or if that is going to be so, for now, I guess we’re both equally in the dark.”

“What do you mean ‘if’?” Yurio scoffed. “Contrary to popular belief, I do pay some amount of attention to what goes on around this hellhole. The way you both look at each other makes me sick to my stomach sometimes. You’re both bigger idiots that I thought you were if you’re going to let go of that so easily.”

Now it was Yuri’s turn to make a non-committal grunting noise in the hopes that Yurio would take it as a proper answer and stop pushing.

“Whatever. You can act like you don’t already know how the whole thing is going to end up if you
want.” Yurio shrugged easily and began collecting the scattered pieces of equipment. “Far be it from me to stop you.”

Yuri took a deep breath, but didn’t say anything in response. He forcibly reminded himself that Yurio didn’t know how complicated it all was and that he didn’t have the full story. How could Yuri expect anyone from the outside looking in to understand why, even in his own head, a wedding was still very much an ‘if’ and not a ‘when’.

Perhaps whatever Victor was going to tell him or show him tonight would help swing the balance between those two options one way or the other. Perhaps it wouldn’t. Perhaps nothing would and Yuri would wake up to get ready for the Christmas Eve Ball without even the slightest clue as to what he was going to do, but the less he thought about it the less he panicked, so he tried his best to put it out of his mind for the time being.

“Thanks.” Yurio’s voice pulled Yuri out of his own head again and this time he didn’t hide his surprise at the word. Yurio scowled as soon as he saw Yuri’s confusion and scoffed loudly enough to echo a bit through the empty space. “What, I can’t thank you for dropping whatever you had planned for this morning in order to come out here and let me hit you for a few hours?”

“I, um… That is…” Yurio had never expressed his thanks in anything other than vague facial expressions and the odd occasion where he would let Yuri have the last roll at dinner. Hearing the words actually articulated caught him more off guard than anything else. “There’s no need to really thank me. I don’t mind, and it’s better than studying in the library until I give myself a headache in any case.”

“I’m not fucking stupid. I know how busy they’ve kept you. Just take the fucking thanks like a normal human being so we can get on with it.” Yurio groused, though Yuri did notice the younger boy wasn’t exactly making eye contact as he shoved their gear back into the closet with more force than usual. “Or you can forget I ever said it if you want. I don’t fucking care.”

For once Yuri was actually fairly certain he knew exactly what was going on in the moment it was happening instead of fifteen minutes later when it was too late to say or do anything about it. Or, at least, he hoped he knew what was happening because if he got it wrong Yurio would not hesitate the unleash the tentative hold he constantly kept on his temper and, despite knowing Yurio would just be using him as a convenient target for releasing some of the anger he carried around, he didn’t exactly want to get yelled at right then.

“You don’t have to worry about interrupting me when you want to come out here to practice, you know.” Yuri tried to keep his tone light, as though he wasn’t concerned what Yurio’s response would be either way. “Even if I’m already out here working on my own stuff, I don’t mind going a few rounds with you. It helps when I’m tempted to put my head through the nearest solid object.
when two hours deep into another meeting with the Minister of Finance.”

Yurio didn’t respond in any way other than to give Yuri a blank look for so long that Yuri was starting to think he had misread things after all. All he could do was act like he wasn’t waiting at all while Yurio decided if he wanted to be angry or not.

“Whatever.” Yurio rolled his eyes and scuffed his shoes against the polished, wood floor, but Yuri could see the small smile cross the teenager’s lips, too, right before it was wiped away as Yurio slammed the closet door shut and shouldered past Yuri to leave.

Yuri let him go without another word. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he was confident he’d actually handled a delicate situation right.

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Yuri had somehow managed to keep his mind busy and engaged for the rest of the day after that. Time even seemed to fly by with the help of Phichit, Leo, and Guang Hong who were all trying to figure out what kind of charity event they wanted to propose to the queen in the coming weeks. It was a decent enough distraction, particularly when JJ had turned up halfway through their brainstorming session and they had spent the rest of the time before and after dinner trying to think up of something that would be better than whatever he was working on. The only awkward spot was when Chris hadn’t shown up for dinner, Phichit giving the explanation that the other man hadn’t felt well after lunch and had said he was going to turn in early for the day.

By the time Minako had shown up to start herding them out of his room in order to get him ready for bed, Yuri was far more relaxed than he had been just that morning. He knew his calm was too good to last, though, and after Yuri had sent Minako on her way for the evening, all he had left to do was wait alone and with nothing more than his own thoughts to keep him company.

Physically, he was exhausted. His lack of sleep from the night before and everything he’d done during the day had caught up to him all at once in a cascading chain of sore muscles and aching joints. In fact, the only thing stopping him from dropping down on top of his unmade bed and falling unconscious was the nervous energy prickling over his nerve endings. It was almost enough to make it feel as though his skin was on fire.
In the hopes of trying to funnel off enough excess energy to at least stop his hands from shaking, Yuri sorted through the limited amount of clothing he’d brought from home as he looked for something to change into. It would have helped significantly if he had known what exactly Victor was wanting to show him or do, of course, but he’d just have to make do with the limited amount of information he’d been given.

It wasn’t like he could go out and hunt Victor down in order to demand a more detailed explanation right then and there, after all.

Well, he did know that Victor wanted to at least meet outside and that Yuri was supposed to get there while hopefully remaining unseen. It hadn’t exactly been warm earlier and Yuri figured that probably hadn’t changed much once the sun had gone down, and, with it being dark, he would also need something that would blend in with the lower light quality. That quickly eliminated a good portion of his personal wardrobe as most of it was either lightweight material, brightly colored, or both.

After some careful deliberation, Yuri chose a pair of dark navy jeans, a long sleeved shirt that was a deep purple color, and a black coat that he’d taken from the palace wardrobe. He hadn’t thought to bring anything heavier than a thick sweatshirt from home and he didn’t know if that would be enough as he didn’t know exactly how long Victor intended to keep them outdoors.

Getting ready had burned about thirty minutes by the time he’d gotten dressed and finished quibbling over whether he should wear contacts or glasses. He had ultimately chosen his contacts and had stowed his glasses in their hard case in his bag.

That was thirty minutes down and about twenty more to go before he needed to start sneaking his way out.

He supposed he could use those twenty minutes to clear out his rapidly growing anxiety by having a small panic attack. Almost like releasing a pressure valve in order to let some of it out. The only problem with that option was that it wasn’t like he could time how long his panic might last.

Pacing helped until it hit that inevitable point where he’d bounced off the walls enough that he was starting to feel trapped. He hadn’t thought about that and he forced himself to stand still in the center of the room and take several deep breathes as he tried to push away the claustrophobic feeling that had crept in.

Well, leaving about five minutes early wasn’t going to hurt anything. Probably. Maybe. He wasn’t
exactly sure, but it seemed to be the better option on the table for the time being, so Yuri took it.

Yuri had spent a fair amount of time sneaking around dorm buildings with paper thin walls in the middle of the night. His anxiety never did fit in well with normal business hours and it certainly didn’t adhere to curfews. Dancing had always been the best way to flush out the bad feelings whenever he had the chance and a cramped dorm room wasn’t exactly the best place to do that. So, making his way through the darkened hallways and narrow servant’s stairs without making a sound was easier for him than it would have been for someone else.

There was a door towards the back of the main wing that wasn’t always guarded. Yuri had taken note of it before, but he’d never actually tried to go through it before at night. On the rare occasions when he did need to get some fresh air at night before he actually exploded, he’d always been too scared to try and truly sneak out. He’d trade not getting caught out of bounds for having a guard follow him at a respectful distance any day.

Tonight, however, he’d been asked to get out unseen and this was the only way he knew how to do that. All he had to do was try and trust that Victor would be where he said he would, when he said he would be there and take his own chances to do the same.

He’d been expecting the door to be locked, but it wasn’t and Yuri was outside and following the shadowed tree-line before he could take even a few seconds to try and talk himself out of just going for it. Yuri wasn’t sure whether he was happy or not about being able to get through the door without hitting any kind of obstacle. On the one hand, it should most likely worry him that someone could get in as easily as he had gotten out. On the other hand, if the door had been locked he would have been stuck. Lock picking wasn’t exactly a skill he’d ever needed to cultivate before.

Yuri was careful and slow as he made his way to the fountain in the dark. He hadn’t thought to bring any kind of light, and he wasn’t entirely sure he should use one even if he had thought to bring it, so, since he figured it was better to stay off the main paths to avoid getting caught, he went slow in order to avoid tripping on anything.

By the time he reached the fountain he could already see the shadowy shape of Victor as he sat on the bench there, silver hair the only part of him truly visible from the distance in the low light given off by the moon and stars.

“You’re early.” Victor must have seen him, too, as the prince got to his feet and held out his arms for Yuri to slip into. “No one saw you, right?”

Yuri wrapped his arms around Victor’s waist and tried to focus on his eyes even with the darkness
throwing his face into shadows. “I don’t think so. I didn’t see a soul.”

“Good.” Victor placed a light kiss on Yuri’s forehead before going on. “Thank you for coming. You didn’t have to.”

“You asked me to come. There was never a chance I wouldn’t.” Yuri stated firmly. That much was the truth. Victor had told Yuri once to trust him and, even though sometimes it was hard, Yuri was going to do it. He didn’t go back on promises when he could help it. “What did you want to tell me?”

“It’s more what I wanted to show you… Well, and tell you, but I want you to get the full picture first.” This time when Victor smiled Yuri could physically see how nervous he was. How his hands shook where they were wrapped around Yuri’s shoulders and it caused him to take a deep breath. He’d only ever seen Victor nervous like this one other time and Yuri had a feeling that whatever this was, it was more important than letting their hormones run away with them on a couch somewhere. “I know it’s hard to see, but follow me?”

Yuri nodded and Victor took a step back before he grabbed Yuri’s hand and tugged him along in his wake.

It was hard to see in the dark, but Yuri was sure Victor was taking him towards the back of the property. Back further into the garden than Yuri had ever been before. Yuri wasn’t entirely sure what was back this way as they were far from any beaten path he knew, but he trusted Victor knew what he was doing. Despite his nervousness, the prince was walking forward with confidence, like he’d walked this route many times in the past and he knew exactly where they needed to go.

He’d never thought about how large the palace property was, or how thick the underbrush could get in the farthest reaches of the garden where it was clear gardeners never came, but Victor never faltered, even when it started to feel less like they were walking through a man-made and tended park and more like an actual forest. Yuri tightened his grip on Victor’s hand and tried to keep a handle on his racing thoughts. Victor knew where they were going. They wouldn’t get lost and they couldn’t get caught. Victor would never take him anywhere truly dangerous. Not if he could help it. He repeated those words inside his head like a mantra and it helped keep him calm.

Yuri supposed, in the grand scheme of things, it didn’t take them long to get to where they were going. Maybe fifteen minutes of walking tops, but even two minutes of walking in silence in the dead of night was enough to set Yuri’s teeth on edge no matter what the circumstance or who he was with. It didn’t help that it was much colder at night under the trees than he’d been anticipating and he
knew his hand must have felt like a block of ice in Victor’s grip.

Their destination turned out to be a clearing right by the high, stone wall that surrounded the borders of the royal property and Victor had come to a sudden halt right in the middle, almost causing Yuri to run straight into his broad back in the process.

“Is this where you wanted to take me?” Yuri asked, his voice barely above a whisper. There was nothing special he could see. Or, at least, nothing that stood out to him immediately. If Victor had just wanted a secure place to talk, Yuri was sure there had to be better options. Not to mention Victor had said there was something he wanted Yuri to see… An empty clearing was a strange thing to want to show someone in the middle of the night by any standard.

“No. This is just where we’re going to meet someone who can take us to the real place I want to show you.” Victor pulled Yuri close, but he kept scanning around the area as though he was looking for something that only he knew how to find. “It’s… It’s outside the palace and a little far away. I’m not actually entirely sure how to find it myself since we take a different way there every time.”

“Who are we meeting? Or is that supposed to be a surprise, too?” Yuri tried to keep his tone light. Tried to make it so that Victor could tell it was a joke, but even he could tell he hadn’t quite made it.

“We’re meeting Otabeck.” Victor said as he pulled Yuri close to his side and looped an arm around his waist. Yuri leant into the half-embrace even as he let out a soft sound of surprise, more to show Victor that he was still there and not going anywhere despite his surprise than anything else. “He’s the only guard I trust to get us to where we need to go in one piece and to protect us once we get there.”

“So, this is what he was doing earlier today? Getting ready to meet us here tonight?” Yuri asked, more to keep the silence at bay that anything else. It was a lot more unsettling to stand out there in the dark in complete silence than it was when they were talking.

“Yes…” Victor pulled back a few centimeters so that he could look down into Yuri’s face. “But how did you know that?”

“Yurio.” Yuri shrugged. “He was in a mood this morning and wanted to practice his fencing, but he said Otabeck was running errands for you so I would have to do.”

“You’re still practicing with him?” Victor asked.
“Yeah. It’s as good a way as any to blow off some steam and I figure Yurio likes having someone to practice with when his usual options are busy. I mean, he hasn’t said that in so many words, but he keeps asking for me to show up so I guess I’m doing something right.” Yuri shoved his hands in his pockets and leant even further against Victor’s warmth. “Have any of you ever thought about maybe getting him a proper instructor again? He’s really good.”

“I don’t know that he’s ever asked for one.” Victor responded after a moment of thought. “Although, I guess I don’t know that for sure. He’s never brought it up when I’ve been around and Father never mentioned anything if Yurio asked him.”

“I get the feeling Yurio doesn’t ask for a lot.” Yuri mused, more to himself that to Victor but he could tell by the way the prince’s grip on his waist tightened that he’d definitely heard. “It was just a thought. I’m sure if it was important to him he would have said something about it by now.”

“Hmm.” Victor hummed under his breath, but didn’t say anything further and when Yuri looked up at his face he seemed like he was deep inside his own mind. “Perhaps…”

There wasn’t much to say after that. Yuri didn’t want to press with more questions about what was going to happen that night. What Victor wanted to show him and tell him. He knew without having to ask that the prince wasn’t going to say anything and Yuri was fine with leaving it. He trusted that Victor wouldn’t take them anywhere they wouldn’t be safe and knowing Otabeck was going as well only intensified that feeling. Despite honestly barely knowing the other man, there was something about his stoic loyalty that put Yuri at ease whenever he was around despite his younger age.

Before either Victor or Yuri could pick up the thread of another topic of conversation, there was a faint rustling noise coming from the bushes off to their left and Otabeck stepped out into the weak light of the clearing.

“Otabeck!” Victor greeted the other man with a broad smile and a wave of the hand that wasn’t still sitting on Yuri’s waist. “I’m sorry that we’re a little early.”

“Not a problem at all, Your Highness. Yuri.” Otabeck nodded in Yuri’s direction and Yuri gave a silent nod in return. “Your Highness, you know the drill.”

“Yes, of course.” Victor released Yuri from his tight grip and Yuri took a stumbling step backwards as the prince dug through his pockets and pulled out two scarves that both looked almost black in the darkness, but when Yuri squinted hard enough he could tell one was a deep blue and the other a
bright purple that bordered on magenta. “Yuri… You trust me, right?”

“Yes.” Yuri didn’t even need to spend any time at all thinking about that answer before he said it and he knew from the smile on Victor’s face that the other man’s eyes would be sparkling and warm if he’d been able to see them clearly.

“There’s a secret way out of the palace that no one knows about. Otabeck is going to use it to get us out beyond the palace walls, but we have to be blindfolded. Even the Royal Family themselves aren’t supposed to know where it is or how to get there. That’s… That’s the only way to keep it safe.” Victor held out one of the scarves for Yuri to take. “Otabeck will lead us through okay, though. I promise.”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve done this is it?” Yuri asked with a small, reassuring grin as he took the scarf that was offered to him. Even as his heart beat faster in his chest at the thought of being vulnerable and defenseless without his sight to guide him.

“No, it’s not.” Victor twisted his own scarf back and forth in his hands. “You… You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. You can go back. I wouldn’t think any less of you.”

“If doing this is important to you, then it’s important to me.” Yuri reached out and placed a hand on Victor’s shoulder, squeezing it gently. “Besides, if Otabeck wanted to kidnap us, he already had a perfect opportunity that day we ran away from the library. I’m pretty sure he’s not going to change his mind now.”

Victor let out a bright peal of laughter at that. “You’re probably right. Okay, well, let’s get going then.”

Yuri took a few deep breathes as he watched Otabeck step forward and tie the blindfold tight over Victor’s eyes and then turned to do the same to him. There was a moment when his sight was taken from him where his breath caught in his throat and he felt an icy chill grip his lungs that had nothing to do with the ambient air temperature.

Even though he’d anticipated the swoop of mind-numbing adrenaline as soon as his vision was blacked out, it still hit him hard with a freezing wave of churning panic. In an effort to stop any kind of embarrassing noises from escaping he bit the inside of his cheek so hard he tasted the coppery tang of blood on his tongue.
“Yuri?” Victor’s voice still sounded as though he was standing incredibly close and Yuri focused in on it, holding out his hand without thinking. Somehow Victor found it and held on tight. “That is you, right? I’m not holding Otabeck’s hand by mistake? Because that would actually be kind of awkward…”

“It’s me.” Yuri confirmed, proud that his voice didn’t waver. He could hear a deep chuckle from somewhere off to his left that he figured was Otabeck as well. “Am I allowed to ask how far we have to go like this?”

“You’re allowed to ask, but Otabeck never answers, so it’s kind of a wasted question.” Victor chuckled to himself and there was the muffled thump of booted feet moving away from him. Since there was no tug on his hand, Yuri figured it was Otabeck moving away and not Victor. “He always takes me a different way, too, so I don’t even have a general estimate for you. He’s careful, but I guess that’s what we pay him to be so that makes sense.”

“Your Highness, if you would please hold out your other hand.” Otabeck’s stern voice cut into their conversation and Yuri could hear Victor sigh and mutter something under his breath. “Thank you. Prince Victor, you know how this goes by now. Yuri, I’ll lead the prince with his hand on my shoulder to where we need to be. I’ve picked one of the easier paths tonight. Just stay close to him and if there’s anything in the way you need to step over or duck under I’ll say something. Other than that, we’ll need to be as quiet as we can be. I’ve got the wall patrol schedule memorized, but that doesn’t mean someone won’t be where they shouldn’t be, okay?”

“Ohkay. I can do that.” Yuri stated with much more confidence than he actually felt.

“Good. Let’s go.” With that, Yuri felt a gentle tug on his hand and he started walking.

Yuri had done a lot of sneaking around in the dark in places he wasn’t supposed to be. When he’d still been a kid he’d snuck out of the house and down the road to a deserted lot where he could meet Yuko and Takeshi and they would whisper and talk and Yuko and Yuri would dance until they were all so tired they could barely keep their eyes open. Then, when he’d been a teenager, he’d slip down the back stairs in the loft apartment he would sometimes crash in over the ballet studio and put in headphones and work until he almost collapsed before sneaking back into his bed without disturbing the old woman who owned the place.

And, of course there was his time in the dorms at the National Ballet. Sometimes he would sneak out alone and just walk the city streets four hours, or sometimes he would sneak out with friends and they would spend the night eating things that weren’t on their approved diet plans or drinking once they had all gotten a little bit older.
He’d never snuck around completely blind before, though, and it was not a comfortable feeling. The only thing that kept him from pulling the scarf off his head no matter what the consequences was Victor’s calm grip on his hand.

It felt like they been walking forever with nothing to break the silence other than Otabeck’s quiet commands to either step over something or duck down. At one point, they walked down a short flight of about ten stairs and then up a longer flight of about twenty after walking through a cool and cramped space Yuri figured was some kind of tunnel, though how far they had gone or what direction they had gone in to get there was beyond him. In fact, he was pretty sure they had backtracked and circled once or twice simply to disorient them even further.

After the first twenty or so minutes, Yuri’s heart had stopped beating so hard in his ears and his breathing returned to something more normal. Sometime after that his steps were more sure as he followed the constant pressure of Victor’s hand pulling him along. By the time Otabeck finally advised them they were where they needed to be, Yuri was almost in a content daze.

He jolted out of it and dropped Victor’s hand as soon as the guard had stopped them and confirmed they were at their destination in order to pull the scarf off his eyes. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dim, yellow pools of light from a pair of nearby streetlamps.

They were standing beside a gravel road, and not one Yuri recognized, though he did have to admit that he didn’t have any kind of knowledge of the geography surrounding the palace. He probably wouldn’t have recognized where they were even if he had. He glanced down at his watch and noted that about forty-five minutes had passed since they had begun their journey, though he doubted it mattered with all the twists and turns and loops they must have taken.

There was no way he was going to find his way back to the palace on his own. He’d passed the point of no return. If there had been an option to go back before, there definitely wasn’t one now. Not once he’d come this far.

“You wanted to show me the side of a road?” Yuri asked blandly and Victor chuckled in return.

“Not exactly.” Victor had also taken his blindfold off as well, and he’d wrapped the scarf around his neck. Yuri copied him and did the same. It seemed to be even colder now that they were coming up on eleven at night and the added warmth was more than welcome. “This isn’t our final destination. We’re going to have to go for a bit of a drive to get there.”

“About that, Your Highness…” Otabeck interrupted. “I wasn’t able to get a car on such short notice, so we will be taking a bike as usual.”
“How’s that going to work?” Victor asked as Otabeck set about moving one of the many brush piles along the side of the road to reveal two black and chrome motorcycles beneath. “I don’t know how to drive one of those things and we aren’t all going to fit on the back of one.”

“I’ve done plenty of research on everyone in the palace. I know Yuri knows how to drive one. You can ride with him and follow me.” Otabeck shrugged, not pausing in his motions at all as he addressed Victor’s concerns. “Or you can ride with me if you want, but I thought you might prefer Yuri’s company more.”

“What?” Victor turned to Yuri then, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. “You really know how, Yuri?”

“Uh… Yeah?” Yuri shuffled from one foot to the other nervously as he shoved his hands back into the pockets of his jacket. “About five of us went in on one when I was with the ballet in order to get around faster on our off times. Whenever someone would leave the company they would sell their share to someone else in the company. I even have a license and everything… I don’t have it with me, but I do have one.”

“You never told me that.” Victor pouted for a split second before his face broke out into another wide grin. “Wow! That’s so amazing. You never do fail to surprise me!”

“I wasn’t trying to surprise you.” Yuri muttered as Victor threw his arms around Yuri’s shoulders and pulled him into a fierce hug. “The topic just never came up. We haven’t exactly been given any opportunities to drive anywhere before tonight…”

“It’s still cool that you know how. I don’t think anyone in my entire family has ever driven anything more complex than maybe a golf cart.” Victor pulled back and smiled down at Yuri in a way that it was impossible for Yuri not to return the gesture. “I think I will ride with you, if you don’t mind.”

“It’s been a few months, but I’m pretty sure I’m not going to kill us, so that should be fine.” Yuri flexed his fingers in his pockets. “I wish I’d thought to bring gloves… Or actually, I wish I had a pair of gloves. No one’s thought to get us any winter clothing yet.”

“Oh, yeah, gloves would have been a good idea, huh?” Victor looked upset and not having thought of that either.
“Here.” Otabeck had finished uncovering the motorcycles and rolling them both out to the shoulder of the road. That task accomplished, he was standing closer to them again, holding out a set of helmets. “There is a pair of gloves in each of the helmets. This is not the first time Prince Victor has forgotten to bring them.”

“Ah, thank you.” Yuri accepted the helmet and dug the leather gloves inside them out and tugged them over his chilled hands. Victor did the same, though Yuri noted the other man was pouting again. Probably at being called out for being forgetful once more. “I would ask if we’re going far, but I wouldn’t get an answer, would I?”

“You would guess correct.” Otabeck offered up something like a crooked smile and made his way back to the bikes, Victor and Yuri following in his wake. “There are microphones and speakers in the helmets. We use a closed channel for security reasons. It has a short range so it’s difficult for anyone to really get a bead on the signal, so keep close to me as we go. If you get too far away I might not be able to hear you and vice versa. There are two channels. I’ll stay on channel one unless I need to pass back any information to you or if you want to tell me something. Other than that, you can both use channel two.”

The silent promise that he wouldn’t listen in on their channel went unsaid. Honestly, that was probably the most words Otabeck had strung together in a single interaction with him so far, so Yuri wasn’t about to press him for more.

It felt strange being back on a bike after months of not using one. It didn’t help that the one he’d been ushered toward was far heavier than the cheap bare bones model he was used to, and the added weight of Victor clinging onto his back took some getting used to, but after the first few miles Yuri had sorted it out and felt confident enough to keep his eyes trained on Otabeck’s taillights and maintain a conversation at the same time.

“How often do you sneak out like this?” Yuri asked, breaking their slightly awkward silence after close to ten minutes of following Otabeck down backroads and even one or two dirt paths. At one point, Yuri almost swore they were heading back towards the city, but they must have turned off at some point because the taller buildings winking in the distance got further and further away instead of closer.

“But as often lately. Too many camera people hanging around even when there is literally nothing worth filming going on, but before this, about once or twice a month.” Victor’s voice sounded clear through the speaker by his right ear even over the low growl of the bike’s engine. “Plus, for a while there, I had something much more interesting to keep me entertained in the evenings.”

Yuri was thankful for the visor that blocked Victor from seeing his face turn red at that comment. Now he was painfully aware of exactly how snug Victor’s hips were fitting up against his backside
and his fingers tightened around the rubber grips on the bike so hard he was sure the leather of his
gloves were squeaking under the strain if he had been in a position to hear it.

“Mmmm… Can’t imagine what that was…” Yuri laughed as he heard Victor’s deeper chuckle in his
ear and smiled softly to himself. “Are you really going to make me wait until we get wherever we’re
going before you tell me anything at all?”

“Yes… If you don’t mind, that is.” Victor paused for a moment before going on. “If you really
want… If it’s bothering you that much, I’ll tell you, but I want you to get the whole picture first… I
just… I just want you to understand everything before you can make any judgements if that’s
alright?”

“Victor, don’t you think if I was going to judge you I would have started somewhere around the time
I was led blindfolded through a secret tunnel?” They both laughed at that and Yuri gave himself a
mental pat on the back for being able to actually speak with some amount of sarcasm even through
the haze of nervousness that still hung over him. “It’s a little too late for that.”

“Ah, so cruel to me as usual.” Victor sighed and Yuri felt him dig the tips of his gloved fingers into
Yuri’s hips. “I’m sorry for putting you through this. I really am. I know that it’s not helping your
nerves any…”

“It’s not so bad. Actually, it’s kind of nice to be anxious for a real reason for once.” Yuri wasn’t sure
if keeping the conversation light in such a serious-seeming situation was the best move, but Victor
wasn’t complaining and it was kind of helping him feel like he was handing everything that was
being thrown at him at least marginally well. “I wouldn’t have come if I couldn’t handle it.”

That was closer to a lie than the truth. Yuri had been about fifty/fifty on calling the whole thing off
more often than he was ever going to admit, and there was still a mild chance that he was going to
break down in a panic attack at some point yet to come, but Victor didn’t have to know that.

“And I wouldn’t have asked you to come if I didn’t know you could.” Victor sounded as confident
as he always did and Yuri let that confidence wrap around him like a thin layer of extra warmth. If
Victor believed he could do it, then Yuri wasn’t about to let him down. “I’m sorry about the way this
has to happen, but I’m not sorry for letting you in on the secret. You deserve to know and I don’t
ever want to keep anything from you ever again, okay? I don’t care about stupid security clearances
or what others think my future husband’s job should be. The only thing that means anything to me is
you.”

“Victor…” Yuri wished he could turn around and look Victor in the eye, but that was impossible
unless he was okay with dying in a fiery crash along the side of the road. Instead, he moved his left hand so that it covered where Victor’s hands were clasped right above his navel.

“Maybe we should talk about this more when we’re not speeding down a deserted road at midnight.” Yuri nodded in agreement and removed his hand from on top of Victor’s and returned it back to where it belonged. “Do you have any idea where we are, by the way? I’ve been trying to figure it out for a long time now, but my sense of direction is about as good as my memory and Otabeck is way too good at his job.”

“That’s not a complaint I think he’s heard before, although I think he’d most likely take it as a compliment.” Yuri turned his head from side to side, but there weren’t a lot of streetlamps down the narrow, paved lane they had turned down about four minutes prior and it was impossible to see any landmarks with the light quality and how fast they were going. “As for where we are… I haven’t got a clue. If we’d gone into the city I might have had a chance of being able to tell where we were going, but out here, in the dark… I’m not even sure how many times we’ve turned anymore to be honest.”

He wasn’t exaggerating either. Yuri had no idea where they were or even where to begin to figure it out. Perhaps if he’d known where they had started or if it had been during the day when any landmarks they might have been passing were more than just black blurs in his peripheral vision he might had stood a chance.

But then again… Maybe not. Victor wasn’t kidding when he’d said Otabeck was good. Yuri wasn’t even sure if they were going towards or away from the palace any longer.

For all he knew they’d been going straight on the whole time and were in a completely different district.

He still wasn’t sure if this was a good idea, but the decision had been more than made. He was stuck with seeing this path through to the end.

Now all that was left was to see if his decision had been a good one or not.

~

It was just past midnight by the time Yuri saw a cluster of lights coming up fast and Otabeck turned off and headed directly toward them. Yuri let out a sigh of relief as he realized that they must be
nearing the end of their journey at last.

Even with Victor keeping up a calm and cheery conversation in his ear, there were still moments when Yuri had to focus hard on keeping his breathing level and his hands from shaking. Even if the entire trip from start to finish had only taken a little over two hours, it almost felt like it had been much longer. He’d even caught himself scanning the horizon for the rising sun once or twice as he’d lost track of time.

It really didn’t help that the further they’d gotten, the more Yuri realized he had absolutely no idea where they were or where they could possibly be heading. Although, he supposed he could find his way to somewhere populated if he really felt the need to. It wasn’t like he was the one hanging on behind someone on the back of a bike. That thought alone was the only thing that stopped him from breaking down completely.

“When we get to the gates, stay behind me and keep your visors up.” For the first time since they’d left the side of the road where they’d begun the driving leg of their clandestine midnight trip, Otabeck’s voice came through the speaker near Yuri’s right ear. “Follow me as close as you can once we get in and please refrain from using the microphones. The fewer people who know who you are, the better.”

They both made noises of acknowledgement and after about another two minutes they pulled up to a chain link fence that was surrounding what looked like a camp made up of tents and campers. There was a makeshift barricade that consisted of wooden slats and what looked like metal siding, though it was hard to tell with the tint of the visor of Yuri’s helmet and the shadows that were cast by the lights strung along the fence.

When Otabeck brought his bike to a stop Yuri did the same, pulling up close enough that the front tire of his bike almost touched the back tire of the guard’s. Otabeck pulled his helmet off his head and clipped it to the seat behind him, honking his horn as soon as it was secured.

Two men stepped out from a small gap in the makeshift gates and walked up to Otabeck, striking up a conversation with him as soon as they got close enough. Yuri felt Victor’s arms tighten around him and Yuri leaned back some into the prince’s chest even as he chewed on his bottom lip and tried to suppress the squirm of nerves that had started up in the pit of his stomach.

He wished he could talk to Victor. Ask him questions, or just hear his voice, but he didn’t say a word. There wasn’t even the sound of breathing in his ear any longer either. For all he knew Otabeck had cut the signal entirely just to take any extra precautions.
Luckily, before he had enough time to really get deep into a blind panic, the two men Otabeck was speaking with laughed and waved them forward as they jogged ahead to open up enough of a space for them to be able to get through. Yuri did as he was told and followed Otabeck as close as he dared without actually hitting him, concentrating on keeping his balance and staying at a constant speed more than his surroundings, though he was able to get glimpses of human figures moving around and sticking their heads out of tents and campers as they went.

Otabeck lead them to the back of the camp and directly into a medium sized building that looked like it had been hastily constructed out of more sheets of corrugated metal and wooden planks. There was a narrow entry point, just barely wide enough for their bikes to fit through without bumping their knees against the edges and Yuri held his breath as they passed through the doorway.

It was cluttered inside with what looked to be spare parts and machinery covered with beige cloths, but there was an empty space in the middle of the building that had oil stains on the concrete and that was where they parked. Yuri let out a tight sigh of relief as he swung his leg around and stood up and stretched his arms over his head until he felt something pop back into place in his lower back.

Victor took off his helmet and shook his head as he began to run his hands through his silver hair in an effort to tame it back into something respectable. Yuri took that as his cue to pull off his own helmet and he strapped it to the back of the bike the way he’d seen Otabeck do earlier. For his part, he didn’t bother to do more than run than run a hand through his bangs once. In his experience, once he had helmet hair there was nothing that would stop it aside from a shower or copious amounts of gel, neither of which he had in his possession.

“We’re early. It’ll be a minute or two before anyone comes for us.” Otabeck wasn’t standing still even as he spoke. Instead he had hurried to the opening in the building and closed a door that had been left open so they were left alone in the dim lighting of the space Yuri figured was probably some kind of garage or shop.

“Can you tell me where we are yet?” Yuri asked, more to have something to keep his mind occupied than really looking for an answer.

“Soon.” Victor promised as he reached out and took Yuri’s hand. “There’s someone I want you to meet first. He’ll be able to explain everything and answer more questions than I probably can. It’s been months since I’ve been here after all. Things could definitely have changed in such a long period of time.”

“Does your father know you come out here in the dead of night like this?” Yuri asked next. “Does he just let you go or…?”
“He knows. Even if he didn’t, I’m sure he would have found out very quickly. There’s not a lot that goes on in the palace that he doesn’t know about.” Victor held both of his hands in front of his palms up and shrugged. “He doesn’t like it, but he knows that Otabeck would never let me get away with doing something stupid and dangerous. I guess he figures it’s a necessary evil.”

Yuri nodded slowly. He still wasn’t quite sure where they were, what they were doing, or even who they were meeting, but knowing the king was aware of it did make him feel a bit better. He hadn’t even realized until that moment how worried he’d been that they would be caught doing something they weren’t supposed to be doing and this time Victor wouldn’t have been able to use his influence to stop the king from sending him home for good.

With that weight off his shoulders, Yuri found that he could breathe a little easier, even though he knew both Victor and Otabeck had to be painfully aware of how he couldn’t quite stop tapping his left foot against the ground.

Victor looked like he was going to say something about it, or maybe even reach out and pull Yuri back into his arms, when there was a rhythmic tapping coming from the other side of the building than they’d entered. 

Otabeck immediately slid into action, crossing the room in several large strides before he rapped his knuckles against the same wall, his entire body strung tight and alert. The tapping from the other side resumed, though the rhythm was slightly different to Yuri’s ear, trained to pick out different beats since he was young.

Whatever coded message Otabeck had received in return made his lips quirk upwards in the ghost of a smirk and he knocked a message back before he stepped backwards just enough for a narrow space to open up in the walls.

“Follow me and keep your heads down.” Otabeck waved at Victor and Yuri and they both rushed to follow his instructions.

There was no one outside once they’d squeezed through the opening and they only paused long enough for Otabeck to slide the hidden panel closed once more before they were off. Otabeck’s pace was quick and Yuri grabbed Victor’s hand as they went, the ridiculous thought that if he didn’t he might end up getting left behind somehow spurring him on.

Yuri did as he’d been told. He kept his head down and stayed as close to Victor’s side as he could without tripping either of them. In his peripheral vision, he could see the canvas sides of tents and haphazard piles of crates and other boxes that lined the small alley they were scurrying down.
was the sound of a myriad of voices in the background, all of them too muffled to really make out the words even if Yuri had been able to go slow and really listen. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up the further they got from the bikes.

Otabeck led them to a larger tent towards the center of the camp and he held up a flap in the side for both Victor and Yuri to duck under as soon as he pulled even with it.

Yuri blinked away the sunspots in his vision as they had gone straight from the dark alley and directly into the brightly lit tent. Once his vision was clearer, the first thing Yuri noticed was the large circular table directly in the middle of the space. The second thing Yuri noticed was the man that had stood up from his seat at the far end of the table as soon as they had stumbled their way inside.

The man was older, bald and thicker around the middle with glasses and a stern expression that softened as soon as he registered exactly who it was that had come in.

“Your Highness, I didn’t expect you so soon.” The man smiled warmly and Yuri let himself be pulled along by Victor as they walked towards him.

“I’ve told you a million times to call me Victor, Josef. We certainly don’t need to stand on formalities now.” Victor’s tone was polite and he squeezed Yuri’s hand before going on. “You know Yuri…”

“I certainly know of him.” Josef laughed and made his way out from behind the table to meet them halfway, holding out a hand that Yuri took and shook for a moment. “It’s nice to get a chance to meet him officially. Even if this meeting was short notice…”

“I’m sorry for the short notice, but…”

Victor stopped talking abruptly as there was a commotion coming from the opposite end of the tent they had entered. They both froze even as Josef and Otabeck both made moves to head that way, neither one of them able to make it in time before another man shoved his way in, yelling over his shoulder at someone as he went.

“I don’t care what he said. I know I saw Otabeck’s bike in the garage. I’m not waiting around all night for… Oh, shit.”

As the tent flap had fallen closed behind him, the intruder turned and they were able to all get a good
look at each other for the first time, though Yuri supposed they didn’t actually need to see his face to know who was bursting in on them. Chris did have a fairly distinctive voice after all.

And it was Chris standing there, no matter how many times Yuri blinked his eyes or pinched himself or told himself that he must be hallucinating.

“Oh… Um… Hi, Yuri. I, uh, didn’t know that Victor was going to be bringing you tonight.” Chris appeared uncharacteristically nervous. Yuri was struck by the odd and completely random thought that the other man looked a lot like the proverbial child who’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Well this is awkward…”

“I would say so.” Victor crossed his arms over his chest, but Yuri had to admit the prince didn’t look too terribly upset about the newest development. Maybe a little irritated, but not as though it was a complete surprise for him to see Chris there at all.

Before Yuri could even begin to unpack the sudden question of why Victor wasn’t surprised to see Chris in this place that was supposed to be super-secret and theoretically inaccessible to anyone who was residing under the tight security at the palace, Chris said something that caused his entire brain to shut down completely.

“I guess it can’t be helped now. Well, Yuri, you’ve found us out.”

“Welcome to the rebel headquarters.”
Whew... last month kind of got away from me. Work has been brutal, but...

The good news is that everything seems to be slowing down and going back into a routine now, and Monroe and I got Reserve Champion (2nd place overall out of a field of 8) and we’re gearing up for one more show before taking a small break until November so my barn life will calm down, too.

Thank you to everyone who has been waiting so patiently for me to get this up!

Chapter 25 – Revelations

“You brought me to the rebel headquarters?” Yuri was sure he’d intended that question to come out calmer and less frantic than it had really sounded, but he couldn’t really think about that right then. It was a miracle he was able to think anything at all with the way his brain was threatening to shut down completely. “W-What? Why!?”

“You didn’t tell him where you were taking him?” Chris sounded like he was a mixture of surprised, disappointed, and almost a little curious.

“I was about to before you showed up.” Victor was smiling, but it was the smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. The one that meant he was trying to keep people out. Projecting a front of cool confidence in order to put everyone at ease. Putting out the aura that made people feel as though Victor was in complete control.

Whether it worked on the others or not, Yuri didn’t know, but it most certainly didn’t work on him. Not anymore.

“You could have told me, Victor. I still would have come.” Yuri had spoken softly, maybe even too soft for most of the room to really hear what he had said, but Victor was right next to him. Close enough that Yuri would have only had to shift a few centimeters to the right and the sleeve of Victor’s coat would have brushed against the back of his bare hand.

“Really?” Victor’s question had been asked in the same quiet volume and Victor turned to look at Yuri with a complicated expression on his face. Something that was probably the closest Yuri had
ever seen to the prince showing vulnerability when there were other people around.

It made Yuri’s heart throb painfully in his chest.

“Yes… I mean… I can’t say I wouldn’t have had questions or reservations or that I would have immediately jumped at the chance to go… But I would have come.” Dimly, Yuri was aware that the other occupants of the room were staring at them, but for once he didn’t really care. This was more important. “I’ve already told you that I trust you. Trust me when I say I meant it.”

There was a brief silence as Victor’s blue eyes scanned Yuri’s face desperately as though it he was looking for something he wasn’t even entirely sure how to find. Yuri forced himself to stand tall and let Victor do what he needed to do, see whatever it was that he needed to see. Find the answer to the silent question he couldn’t find the voice to ask.

After what felt like forever, Victor let out a small sigh and the edges of his lips quirked upwards a bit.

“I’m sorry.” When Victor reached out to take his hand, Yuri let him do it. They both squeezed at the same time and Yuri smiled warmly as he felt a welcome flutter in his chest. “I won’t let it happen again.”

“You mean there are more random places you want to take me in the middle of the night with little to no warning?” Yuri wasn’t sure if making a joke was appropriate in this situation or not, but he did know that if the tension wasn’t broken somehow, he was going to have a nervous breakdown. He figured that would definitely be worse than a misdirected attempt at bland humor.

“None that immediately come to mind.” Victor was nothing if not the master of reading a room and being able to roll with any sudden mood shifts. Yuri beat back a sigh of relief as Victor turned back to the others, pleased when the prince continued to hold his hand while he did so. “Right, so… Where were we?”

“We were about to explain what Chris is doing here.” Yuri was sure that wasn’t at all where the conversation had been headed prior to Chris’ arrival, but the man was there now and, Yuri at least, was more than a little confused as to how or why. “What exactly is Chris doing here?”

“That’s… A long story.” Chris sighed and shrugged. “Which I might as well tell you since the horse is already out of the barn. You know, no point in trying to close the door now and all that jazz. I would, however, suggest we maybe sit instead of standing around awkwardly during story time?”
“That sounds like an excellent idea.” Josef gestured to the chairs surrounding the table. “Since it seems as though we might be here for a bit, does anyone want anything before we start? Water perhaps? I know you’ve all had a relatively long journey.”

“I’ve got it.” Otabeck stated firmly as he pulled bottles of water from out of the backpack he still hadn’t taken off. As Otabeck handed out the drinks, everyone else took up seats at the table. Yuri couldn’t help but notice that Victor had purposefully pushed his chair closer to Yuri’s as he did so. The gesture went a long way towards keeping his nerves at bay and relatively settled and he showed his appreciation for it by grabbing Victor’s hand again under the table.

“Aren’t you going to sit, too?” Chris asked, pointedly looking at where Otabeck had taken up a position behind and slightly off to the left of Victor’s chair.

“I’d prefer to stand.”

“Of course, you would.” Chris offered up a bland smirk before sobering up some. “So… Story time?”

“Where should we even start?” Victor asked as his gaze flickered between Josef and Chris as though he was waiting for one of them to step up. “From what I understand, it was a bit complex even before I came into the picture.”

“Yes, well, there are very rarely things in life that are simple.” Josef stated with a sad smile. “But, if we are going to start at as close to the beginning as we can, then I guess that means I should go first.”

“Yuri.” Yuri sat up straighter in his seat as Josef addressed his directly. “It would help if we knew exactly how much you know, so… What do you know about the rebellion?”

“Honestly? Not much.” Yuri had no choice but to tell the truth. He was pretty sure this was a situation where ‘fake it until you make it’ wouldn’t exactly apply. “My parents would watch the news in the evenings when I was younger and talk about it sometimes, and there was a TV in the common area of the dorms… But I never spent much time watching. I’m not sure how accurate secondhand gossip from other dancers and half-remembered conversations my parents had five years ago is going to be.”

“But you are not unaware that there have been a few underground movements in the country
comprised of those who are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, correct?” Josef asked, keeping his eyes locked on Yuri and no one else.

Yuri shifted in his seat and resisted the sudden urge to turn and look at Victor to see if he could tell what the prince was thinking. They were kind of dancing around the implication that there was a rather large group of people that had severe issues with his family’s policies. As politely stated as it had been, it still had to have been a little insulting.

“I… I am aware there have been incidents…” Yuri took a deep breath and nodded his head slowly as he desperately tried to think of a way out of his current situation. “I know there are people out there that feel as though some of the current laws could stand to undergo revisions and they have staged demonstrations to draw attention to their points with various degrees of intensity and success.”

“You know… If I didn’t know better, I would think you were a plant in the Selection process. Like someone has totally been training you for years to be the perfect diplomat.” Chris laughed loudly in a way that immediately grated on Yuri’s nerves in a way it usually didn’t. “Shit. It’s like you have these perfect answers locked and ready to go at all times.”

“Well, what the hell else am I supposed to say?” Yuri snapped back. Any patience he might have had must have flown the coop somewhere along one of the narrow back roads they’d taken to get there because it was suddenly nowhere to be found. “I don’t know any more or less than anyone else whose sole information source is the news and magazines. That doesn’t mean I have to be an ass about it.”

“Chris, that’s enough.” Victor’s tone was barley a degree above icy. Enough so that Chris visibly cringed from across the table. “You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about… Which is rich coming from you since you actually are a plant.”

“Ah! Victor! You wound me. Is that all I am to you even after all this time?” Chris sighed dramatically and placed a hand over his heart as he pouted. “And here I am doing you the world’s biggest favor.”

“Only you would think marrying into royalty could be considered the world’s biggest favor.” Victor let out a terse huff of laughter and shook his head even as Yuri felt something warm rush through his body.

Huh. He still wasn’t quite used to how being jealous felt. It left a bitter taste in his mouth and he bit the inside of his cheek in an effort to not even so much as twitch lest he give away exactly what he was thinking.
“Okay… So, what you’re saying is that Chris was purposefully chosen for the Selection as… What? A failsafe?” Yuri had to admit that might not have sounded as bad as what had originally popped into his mind along with the unwelcome image of Victor and Chris with matching gold bands on their hands… But he could still tell from the way Victor’s face instantly fell that he hadn’t been able to do a good enough job at hiding where his feelings had been hurt so he scrambled to try and cover it up better. “Can you even do that?”

“It does kind of sound like cheating, doesn’t it?” Chris offered up with an easy shrug and a light chuckle. Yuri could tell Chris was trying to put him at ease, but he wasn’t exactly in the mood to be comforted by anyone right then so it didn’t help as much as he was sure the other man hoped it would. “Okay… I can see that I shouldn’t have opened my big mouth…”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Josef cut in sternly, even as both Chris and Victor tried to open their mouths, perhaps to do some damage control. “Granted, that’s never stopped you before, but I never cease to hope that one day you’ll actually figure out when it’s best to hold your tongue.”

Chris grumbled something Yuri couldn’t hear under his breath and then pinched his thumb and index finger together and drew them across his lips as he mimed zipping them and throwing away an imaginary key.

“Thank you.” Josef let out a beleaguered sigh and turned back to Yuri. “Chris means well, but he can let his mouth get ahead of his brain sometimes. Now, where were we…?”

“It was partially my fault as well.” Victor tightened his grip on Yuri’s hand under the table and Yuri returned the gesture even though his mind was still whirring and trying to come to grips with what he’d just learned. As much as the darker part of his brain tried to convince him otherwise, trusting Victor didn’t just apply to trusting him when he said something or asked Yuri to do something. It meant trust him when he didn’t say something either. “I think we were about to explain to Yuri exactly what the long-term goals of the rebellion are and then go from there?”

“I would assume it would be the big things for the most part.” Of course, trusting Victor even when he didn’t tell Yuri things didn’t mean he had to like it and he figured he was well within his rights to be a little snippy about it. “I don’t pay attention to the news, but I do listen to the people around me. There are a lot of Fives, Sixes, and Sevens that are calling for change.”

“And a lot of people above them that don’t want any change at all.” Josef stated. “It doesn’t help that for so long there has been too much fragmentation between all the different groups that would call themselves rebels to draw any real attention to what any of us are trying to accomplish. Not to mention some of them tend to be more enthusiastic about matters than they need to be.”
“Josef has been trying to communicate with and unite all the splintered factions for the past several years into one coherent unit.” Victor explained. “It’s been hard for any branch of the government to really take any rebels seriously, even when they have valid points, if they’re scattered all over the country and not following the same game plan. It’s a lot easier for local district governments to squash a movement when it’s tiny and underfunded.”

“Or when they turn to violence as their first method of persuasion.” Josef cut in with a bitter scowl. “It’s almost impossible to be taken seriously when even those who you are supposed to be advocating for are afraid of you. We’ve had a lot of success in recent years with cutting off the most radical of factions and making it very clear that the main movement has no ties to such ideology.”

“That… That sounds good.” Having lived in the capitol for the last five years, Yuri hadn’t exactly been exposed to really anything he could categorize as violent. The military presence around the city kept any demonstrations to a minimum, but he vaguely remembered hearing about supply trucks being intercepted or government buildings that had been damaged or set on fire one or twice when he’d been living at home. None of it had been close to his city, but the few days after such an incident had always meant Yuri and Mari had been relegated to staying closer to home before everything would more or less go back to normal. “And you’ve been working with them, Victor?”

“Only for about four or so years now. Before that Father would coordinate with Josef when he could. As difficult as it is for me to get out of the palace, it’s far more difficult for Father to slip out. Especially when he’s expected the be available at the drop of a hat in case of an emergency, and it’s actually less easy to slip people without any amount of security clearance in, which I suppose is understandable, so…” Victor’s expression had turned more serious as their discussion had gone on, but it softened some as he looked at Yuri. “I wish we could be more open about matters, but we don’t want to run the risk of riling up our opposition before we’re ready to make any truly lasting moves.”

“There need to be changes. Father and I haven’t exactly been able to figure out exactly how we can accomplish it, but we know it needs to happen.” Victor continued, more focused on Yuri than anyone else in the room once more. “It’s helping to have a united front standing in resistance to the status quo. It gives us more room to talk and make proposals.”

“And maybe one day we’ll actually be able to get accurate media coverage of what changes we want for this country.” Chris spoke up firmly. Yuri fidgeted in his seat as Victor let out a quiet sigh beside him, though apparently not soft enough not to catch Chris’ attention even with almost the entire length of the table between them. “Hopefully someday very, very soon.”

“Chris…” Victor sounded like he was giving the other man a warning and Chris’ response was merely to cross his arms over his chest and hold the prince’s gaze. They stared at each other for a
long moment as though waiting to see who was going to back down first.

It got to the point where it crossed over the border from tense to ridiculous and Yuri let out his own agitated sigh, which had the effect of drawing all eyes on his once more. “I don’t know about all that, but what I do understand is that you’re telling me the royal family has been working in secret with members of an organization of rebels that want to incite change in the country. Have I got most of the important bits so far?”

“That’s actually a fairly accurate representation of the current state of affairs.” Josef seemed just as keen about changing the subject of their discussion as Yuri was. “We’ve made some strides lately with Victor’s help, but we still have some ways to go until we can reach some of our more long-term goals.”

“Okay…” There were roughly a million questions running through his brain and he tried to calm himself enough so that only one or two could rise to the surface for him to focus on. “Okay… That makes sense. I still don’t quite understand why I’m here though.”

“That’s the only thing that is obvious.” Chris let out a loud bark of laugher. “He wants to know how you feel about him working with us before he marries you. You know, just in case you have a problem with it.”

“Chris! Seriously?” Yuri could tell Victor was trying to project a sense of calmness, but there was a touch of something Yuri recognized as panic in his eyes despite his best efforts to hide it.

“Yes, seriously. I have to hold my tongue at the palace, but I don’t have to do that here.” Chris looked about as smug as Yuri had ever seen him, which, considering Chris constantly had an air of smugness about him, was saying a lot. “Besides, I’m not saying anything the whole world doesn’t already know. Face it, neither of you are particularly subtle about it.”

“It’s still not your business.” Yuri shot back. Maybe it was the jealousy talking, or maybe it was the lack of sleep making him delirious, but Yuri wasn’t feeling his usual knee-jerk reaction to outright deny that there was the very real possibility that he was going to end up marrying Victor. “And Victor can do whatever he wants. He doesn’t need my approval or permission, and if he wants it, that’s not a conversation you’re going to be involved in.”

“Right…” Chris cleared his throat and Yuri refused to let the thin layer of awkwardness settle over him for once. Instead, he tried to channel some of the confidence he used to be able to summon before a performance and wrap it around him like a shield. “Anyways… Societal changes. That was what we were talking about, right?”
“You do know that one of these days you are going to say something you can’t take back?” Josef frowned and shook his head.

“Probably, though I am usually pretty good at knowing how far I can go with any given audience. It’s a gift.” Chris grinned broadly. “If I do recall, I’ve been able to smooth-talk almost everyone in this room out a sticky situation or two.”

“You’ve also smooth-talked us into a sticky situation or two, if I recall.” Victor responded with his own wide grin. “I’m pretty sure you are at least seventy percent of the reason why Otabeck’s predecessor retired. I’m also willing to bet you’ll also be about seventy percent of the reason Otabeck goes prematurely grey.”

“I think you are going to need to rethink those percentages, Your Highness.” Otabeck spoke up from his position behind them and Yuri started a bit in his seat. He’d almost forgotten the guard was even there with how quiet he’d been. “And my father didn’t retire, he asked to be reassigned to your father’s guard detail as soon as you announced you were going to have your Selection. I suspect it didn’t have as much to do with Chris as you seem to think it did.”

“It might have had a little to do with Chris.” Victor protested. “It couldn’t all be me.”

“If I recall, Chris wasn’t the one that ran away into the city without telling anyone where he was going and refused to go back until the end of the day.” Otabeck had a pleased smirk on his face and Yuri could practically feel the room relax.

Of course, that could have had something to do with the fact that Yuri was pretty sure no one present had seen Otabeck smile before, but, whatever the case, he welcomed the change in atmosphere.

“You’re right. That was all Yuri.” Chris quickly picked up the thread of the joke and ran with it. “See? Everyone keeps thinking I’m the bad influence, but there’s truth in the saying that it’s the quiet ones you have to watch out for.”

“I’m going to blame Victor for that one.” Yuri was quick to jump to his own defense. As far as he was concerned, he wasn’t going to take the brunt of this on his own. Especially since this time no one in the room currently had the ability to get Victor in trouble for much of anything. “I might have had the idea, but Victor was the one that grabbed us and drug us outside.”
“Hey! I don’t remember hearing a lot of protest from any of you.” With the earlier tension now completely broken, Victor was pouting and looking at Yuri like Yuri had just broken his heart. Maybe three months ago that looks would have caused Yuri to freak out and frantically backpedal. No, however, he knew enough to tell when Victor was just being dramatic. “I personally feel like we should blame Otabeck. He could have stopped us.”

“You know who you should be blaming?” Chris cut in without even giving Otabeck a chance to say anything to the contrary, not that Yuri was entirely sure the guard was even really going to try. He did notice that Chris’ green eyes were twinkling and he looked a lot more like his usual self that Yuri had seen him look in the last two weeks. “Yurio. Right now, you should totally blame the one person who’s not here to defend himself.”

“Perfect! I like that idea. No one tell him!” Victor released Yuri’s hand long enough to clap his own together and laugh, picking it back up again as soon as he was done. “It’s only fair since I know he blames me for all kinds of things when I’m not around.”

“Gentlemen… As entertaining as this had been, I think we should get back on topic again.” Josef cleared his throat and paused for a moment until all eyes were back on him and all fidgeting had ceased. “We don’t exactly have a lot of time left if we want to get the four of you back to where you belong without drawing any undue attention to your absences.”

“Right. That would be best.” Victor took a deep breath and Yuri squeezed his hand under the table. He felt a wave of calm wash over hi as Victor sent him a warm look in response. “Anyways, several years ago, Josef came to my father in secret after an official function… How long ago do you think that was? Like five years?”

“It was longer ago than that. King Yakov and I had been in talks for years before we brought either you or Chris into the picture.” Josef explained patiently. “I’d say our first meeting was about eleven years ago, you were too young to accompany him to state functions at that time, Victor. Anyway, back then we were completely scattered I was in close contact with some leaders sympathetic to the cause in a few of the larger districts… Kent, Carolina, New Haven, and a few others. There was a lot of concern back then with some fringe groups causing trouble all over the place. Looting, protests, disruption of supply lines and other businesses… Enough activity that it couldn’t be ignored, and not in a productive or positive way either.”

“We knew it was only a matter of time before something official was going to be done and, at the rate things were going, it was looking more and more likely that it was going to end with military intervention. Which was something neither side really wanted, by the way.” Josef sighed heavily. “Civil war was exactly what we were going to get if we couldn’t find a way to head it off.”

“So you decided to approach the King for help?” Yuri asked, suddenly eager to know the answer.
For the first time, he was starting to wish he’d paid better attention to current events when he’d had the chance. He didn’t have the slightest idea how close they could have been to seeing uniformed soldiers in the streets and that fact bothered him in a way he wasn’t sure it would have even six months ago. “That sounds brave…”

“Some would say brave and some would say stupid, but yes. Since I’m in local government here in Angeles, my contacts knew I had the best chance of being able to get face time with the King.” Josef shrugged. “It was risky, but it was better than letting matters continue to get exceedingly closer and closer to getting out of hand entirely. I’d met King Yakov once or twice before when he would visit Parliament, and he always seemed like he would be open to a conversation at the very least. Firm but fair is usually how he’d described.”

“I’d agree with that.” Victor stated proudly. “Maybe a little stuck in the past and sometimes slow to fully embrace change, but Father is generally very fair. Wouldn’t you agree, Yuri?”

“Um… Well, he didn’t charge me with treason when you let me kidnap you… I guess that was fair.” Yuri couldn’t help but giggle a little when Victor put on an overly distraught look and nudged Yuri in the side with his elbow.

“Oh, so now you admit you kidnapped him?” Chris teased from across the table. Yuri’s only reaction to that was to send the other man a sour glare. He knew it wouldn’t be taken seriously by Chris at all, but it made him feel better to send it all at the same. “I think you should be disqualified. There has to be something about that in the rules somewhere. Something like ‘You are not allowed to kidnap the Crown Prince for your gain. Even if you intend to give him back eventually.’”

“Actually… That’s not in there at all.” Victor tapped the index finger of his free hand against his pursed lips. “Seems like kind of an oversight to me…”

“Can the lot of you focus and be serious for more than five minutes at a time?” Josef was starting to sound more than just a bit frustrated and Yuri straightened up some in his seat as both Victor and Chris nodded and did their best to look apologetic. “Thank you. Now, where was I?”

“You met with Father in order to get his help with the Rebellion.” Victor provided cheerfully. “Considering we’re all sitting here in a tent in the middle of nowhere at one in the morning instead of visiting you in prison, I’m going to make the assumption your meeting went well.”

“It didn’t exactly go smoothly at first, but the King did agree to listen and give me an opportunity to prove I have something worthwhile to the table before he made a decision about arresting me or not.” Josef chuckled some under his breath as though he was revisiting a particularly interesting memory.
“It turned out that we both wanted close to the same thing. Neither one of us wanted a firefight and we both agreed that there were some valid requests that were being asked for. As Victor can attest, we’ve been laying the groundwork for change for years now. In return for that consideration, we’ve taken an active role in controlling the fringe groups and trying to either absorb them if we can and dealing with them if we can’t. That way it doesn’t look like the Crown is attacking citizens by sending out the military, but we still have a way to move forward.”

“It’s an agreement that has worked well so far.” Victor cut in. “Father and I have a few proposals pending in Parliament right now that we hope will ease some of the restrictions on the lower castes very soon, but it’s been slow going. There are a lot of Twos and Threes blocking the way because they are more worried about what they stand to lose personally instead of considering what might be best for the country as a whole.”

“They need to start worrying about something other than themselves soon.” Chris stated. Gone was his easy-going attitude again and Yuri was surprised to see how serious he’d instantly become. Almost like a switch had been flipped somewhere inside him. It was a change that sharpened his features and made the fine hairs at the back of Yuri’s neck stand at attention. “We aren’t going to wait forever for them to get in line. We’ve already been waiting long enough.”

“Chris…” This time, Yuri couldn’t help but think Josef just looked tired. “We’ve talked about this…”

“Then maybe we should stop talking about it and actually do something.” Chris did not look at all happy and Yuri felt Victor stiffen at his side. The prince looked immediately defensive and Yuri felt all of Josef’s exhaustion as though it was his own. “Don’t look at me like that. You know I’m not the only one that feels that way.”

“I understand, Chris. I really do, but what exactly is it that you want us to do? Skip over Parliament and issue and Royal Executive Order? You know Father is not going to do that and I can’t exactly override him.” For his part, Victor did look genuinely upset as he spoke, and there was an odd tremor in his voice that Yuri was sure he’d never heard there before. “I’m not King yet and it could be decades before I am.”

“Not to mention, even if he could, that doesn’t mean he should and you know that, Chris.”

Chris looked like he wanted to push further, but Otabeck cleared his throat loudly in the background. “Sorry to interrupt, but we have roughly thirty minutes before we really need to and this argument tends to go kind of whenever you two get into it… Also, I’m not even the tiniest bit kidding. We’re leaving in thirty minutes on the dot even if I have to knock each and every one of you out and carry you.”
“Otabeck is, as usual, one hundred percent right.” Victor was trying to sound relaxed again, but Yuri could still see a line of tension in his jaw. “We can talk about this later, Chris. I promise.”

“I’m going to make Yuri hold you to that.” Chris said after about thirty seconds of pause.

“What? Why me?” Yuri sputtered for a moment even as Chris laughed and Victor gave the other man an arched eyebrow and a lopsided smirk in response.

“Because I have faith that you’re going to hold him to it.” Chris explained and Yuri took a deep breath that he let out in an extended sigh. Chris probably did have a point, loathe as Yuri was to admit it. Victor had proven that, while he wasn’t neglectful by any means, he did have a tendency to push away things he didn’t necessarily want to do so long as they weren’t the highest of priorities. “Besides, you’re in the circle now, Yuri. We need to watch each other’s backs. Take care of each other, you know?”

Normally, Yuri would have assumed Chris meant that to come out less flirty than it had, but Yuri had spent several months in close quarters with the other man and he was certain that every single inflection had been put in there on purpose. It no longer caught him off guard, however, and Chris seemed to be pleased when Yuri did nothing more than level a bland look in his direction, not rising to the bait like he would have in the past.

“Fine. Whatever.” Yuri rubbed the pads of the fingers of his free hand against his left temple in a desperate attempt to stop the headache he could sense brewing there for forming completely. “We can deal with whatever that means later. Preferable after I’ve gotten more than two hours of sleep.”

“Fair enough.” Now that Yuri had acknowledged he was apparently going to be playing a future role in whatever this was as opposed to running screaming towards the nearest exit perhaps, Chris seemed calmer and more content. Not that Yuri even had that option available to him at the current moment, but he wasn’t about to point to out even for accuracy’s sake. “So… How do you feel about all of this?”

“Um… Mostly exhausted to be completely honest.” It wasn’t even close to being a lie or a well-placed quip either. Yuri felt completely drained and mostly empty. It was kind of hard to get an accurate read on his emotions when he was rapidly approaching the point where he was too tired to have any. “But I’m not about to run for the nearest news station as soon as I can to turn everyone in, if that’s what you’re worried about.”
“No one’s worried about that at all.” Victor was quick to jump in to reassure Yuri and Yuri definitely appreciated the gesture even though he knew there was no one way Victor could possibly be speaking for anyone but himself. “I wouldn’t have even brought you if I thought for a second you’d try to betray anyone here.”

“Yes, well, they don’t know me like you do.” Yuri pointed out stubbornly. “I mean, Chris might, but Josef doesn’t, so I still want to make sure he understands that, okay?”

“Thank you, Yuri. Everyone here appreciates your discretion… Not that anyone would be able to find us even if you did tell but I thank you none the less.” Josef did seem a bit more at ease in Yuri’s opinion. Like maybe he hadn’t been quite as confident when it came to trusting him as Victor was. He still wasn’t entirely sure exactly how he felt about what he’d seen and learnt, but he was struck with the thought that he wanted to prove Victor’s trust was warranted no matter what he ended up thinking in the end. “Now, we don’t have a ton of time left, but we can use some of it to answer any questions you might have.”

“Oh, yeah. Questions…”

The problem with that was Yuri had roughly a million questions. Some of them were relevant. Some of them weren’t. Some of them he wanted to ask Victor when they were alone, and some he wanted to ask Chris, also alone. He even had one or two for Otabeck that he was confident were going to go unanswered no matter when and how they were asked. Sorting through the mess to find the right one to ask was harder than it really should have been, but no one said anything or pushed him as he tried to pinpoint a good one.

Finally coming up with something decent, Yuri barged ahead. “Okay… You’ve said you’ve all been pushing for changes, but I don’t recall anyone actually saying what any of those changes are…”

“Excellent question! I have hoped to get that out of the way earlier, but some people thought interrupting constantly was a more effective information delivery method.” At that Josef sent a warning glare directly at both Victor and Chris as though he was daring them to prove his point by interrupting him once more. When both mean remained resolutely silent, though Yuri couldn’t help but notice both were pouting slightly, Josef went on. “We have both long-term and short-term goals. Overall, we’re looking for sweeping changes with the current social system. Long-term, we want to eventually see the end to the caste system all together. Short-term, we’re trying to make strides when it comes to leveling the playing field some within the current system that’s in place. Things like working towards fairer wages, letting everyone have the option to own their own property or businesses, giving members of the lower castes access to education and the tools they need to use it… Things like that.”

“Like Victor mentioned before, it hasn’t been an easy process. There are people that benefit greatly
from things continuing to go to the way they have been. Powerful people who know they won’t be quite as powerful once we’ve succeeding with changing the status quo.” Josef had sobered some during his explanation and Yuri felt the gravity of the situation settle on his shoulders.

This had never been something he’d really thought about, being so caught up in his own life, and, while he knew firsthand the kinds of problems that could and did come from having the laws the way there were currently… He’d never thought about change. Not in any meaningful way, at least.

But now was not the time to let the guilt he could feel brewing in his gut catch up to him. He would have plenty of time to go through that impending negativity spiral when there was no one else around to witness it.

Instead of withdrawing into himself like his anxiety desperately wanted him to, Yuri nodded. “Those sound like good goals.”

“Thanks. We thought so.” Yuri wasn’t sure if Chris had meant to sound so sarcastic or not, but he let it go for the moment for the sake of not starting another argument that could possibly steer them off track once more. “I, personally, feel those are very reasonable requests.”

“It doesn’t sound like anyone disagrees with you.” Yuri responded sharply before either Victor or Josef could do much more than open their mouths for their own rebuttals. “I might not have spent as much time considering it as you have, but I don’t disagree at all that now is as good a time as any for a change.”

“Very eloquently put.” Victor exclaimed, again before anyone else could do anything more than open their own mouths for a reply. “We can talk about this more in depth later. Right now, I can practically feel Otabeck glaring through the back of my skull. I don’t think any of us want to piss off my personal guard again this evening.”

Yuri twisted in his seat to look back at said guard. He wasn’t sure exactly what Victor was talking about since Otabeck looked as stone-faced as he always did. Even if he had wanted to say something along those lines, Otabeck made a deep noise of approval and uncrossed his arms from over his chest.

“His Highness is right. It’s time to go.” This time there was absolutely no room for argument or protest in the guard’s tone. “Josef, it was good to see you doing well.”
“Same to you. If you see your father, please give him my greetings.” Josef stood as he spoke and the rest of the room took their cue from him. As soon as Otabeck nodded in recognition of Josef’s words, the older man turned back to Yuri. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Yuri. I hope I get the chance to spend more time with you in the future.”

“Yes, you too.” As soon as he’d said that, Yuri noticed something in Victor’s eyes light up even as he noticed Chris’ smile falter for the tiniest is seconds. Not exactly in a position or mood to try and break that down. In order to take his mind off it, Yuri dropped Victor’s hand after one last squeeze and reached out to shake the hand Josef was offering him from across the table. “Thank you for agreeing to let me come.”

That second statement had been aimed towards Victor as much as Josef and the softer look in the prince’s eyes let him know his message had been received.

The next few hours after that had become a blur to Yuri. They spent the winding ride to whatever specific drop-off point of Otabeck’s choosing in total silence. Yuri was barely even awake enough to keep the sight of Chris’ broad back sitting perched on the back of Otabeck’s bike in focus enough to make sure they stayed on the road where they belonged.

To his credit, no one else was on the coms trying to strike up a conversation either. All he had to steady himself was the warmth of Victor’s body at his back and the way the prince’s arms would periodically tighten around him.

The blindfolded walk back into the palace grounds was silent as well and included an awkward moment where Chris went to grab for Yuri’s shoulder and somehow got his ass instead.

Not that he thought even for the most infinitesimally smallest of seconds that it hadn’t been done on purpose, he still didn’t have enough energy to do more than jump a bit before letting out a heavy sigh and redirecting Chris’ hand to the more neutral zone that was his shoulder. At least he could take comfort in the fact that only Otabeck had been without a blindfold at the time. It would good to know only the one person he count on not to draw attention to Yuri’s embarrassment or spread any gossip was the only one who could have seen.

Aside from that, everything else went smoothly and it was drawing close to half past four in the morning when by the time the four of them stumbled through the same unlocked door Yuri had gone through hours before.

There was a small moment as they prepared to separate to go their own ways by one of the back stairwells that Yuri would later remember with intense embarrassment.
At the time, it had felt completely natural, Yuri exhaustion meaning that he wasn’t as acutely aware of his surroundings as he typically was and his mental fatigue meaning that he was craving comfort in a way he normally wouldn’t. With both of those factors working against his rational brain, it had felt completely natural to pause right before Victor turned to find a stairway that would take him closer to his rooms on the third floor and grab him by the hand as he rose up onto his toes in front of both Chris and Otabeck and he gave Victor a chaste peck on the lips before turned and trudging up the stairs in front of him without another word.

Later he would definitely freak out about that. Right then he was far too drained to care.

He was unconscious the minute his head hit the pillow.

~

Eight o’clock come way too early and no matter what tricks Minako tried, she couldn’t make him budge from where he’d wrapped his blankets around his body in a sort of cocoon. Even her last resort of pulling his sheets out from under him didn’t work. Through everything she attempted, he remained a sullen, grumbling lump on the bed through it all.

In the end, he’d muttered something about not feeling well and not having any important meetings until after noon anyway and she agreed to leave him alone until then, though she did so with all the reluctance she could muster.

However it had been gained, Yuri was grateful for her acquiescence and he’d been out of it again the second he heard the door’s lock click into place behind her.

The next thing he remembered was hearing a firm knock on the door.

Yuri groaned to himself as he rolled over to glare at the door as though doing so would somehow let the person on the other side knew exactly how little they were wanted. When nothing happened for about thirty seconds Yuri hoped they’d maybe taken his lack of response as a hint and had gone to leave him alone.

His hopes were dashed when there was a second, much more insistent knock.
Yuri fumbled for where he’d left his watch on the end table next to his bed and drug it close enough to his face where he could read it through squinted eyes. He was pretty sure he’d told Minako to wake him up after lunch and it was barely eleven. Not to mention the fact that Minako had a key and had never once hesitated to use it.

While he was trying to get his sleep-addled mind to come up with another option for who could be on the other side of his door, the person knocked for the third time and Yuri pushed himself out of his bed.

Not at all in the mood to be concerned with what he looked like, Yuri shoved his glasses onto his face and ran his hands through his hair twice before he stumbled over to open the door.

Yuri yanked the door open and had been fully prepared to give whoever was on the other end a curt greeting before sending them on their way. He honestly didn’t care if it was the king himself on the other side. He had nowhere to be for at least another hour and a half and he was determined to use every second of that time sleeping.

“Perfect. You’re here.” Without even letting Yuri have a chance to get his bearings or say a word, Chris shoved past him and into the room with no other preamble. “I was starting to worry that you’d gone out somewhere in the palace to hide.”

“Good morning, Chris. Lovely to see you. Would you like to come in for a moment?” Yuri sighed as there was now nothing in front of him other than an empty hallway and he shut the door with a firmer than necessary click before turned around to face where Chris was waiting for him with his arms crossed and an odd expression on his face. After about thirty seconds of silence, Yuri was done with waiting. “Can I help you, or did you just intend to barge in here and stand in the middle of my room in complete silence?”

For his part, Chris didn’t even look the slightest bit guilty for invading Yuri’s room without permission. He also looked almost as disheveled as Yuri did with dark circles under his eyes. Yuri hadn’t even known the other man needed corrective lenses either, but there was a pair of round wire-framed glasses resting on his nose and he was wearing loose jeans and rumpled shirt that were a far cry from Chris’ normal attire.

“Sorry for bothering you, but when I finally made it downstairs Phichit told me you hadn’t left your room for the day. It was an opportunity I couldn’t bring myself to pass up.” Chris uncrossed his arms and held his hands out, palms up as though he was trying to show that he had come in peace. “I just… I felt like we might need to talk. Just the two of us.”
“You’re probably right.” Yuri moved past Chris and took up a perch on the edge of his bed, pulling his bare feet up underneath him and settling among the wrinkled blankets. If he’s going to have to do this right now, Yuri was going to at least make sure he was comfortable for what could very well end up being one of the most awkward conversations of his entire life. “You might as well sit down.”

“Oh, yeah. Good idea.” Chris grabbed Yuri’s desk chair and turned it around so that it faced the bed before sinking down into it. “So… Last night was a thing that happened…”

“Yeah, it sure was.” Yuri agreed amiably enough. He had questions for Chris, of course he did, but he was more curious to let the other man go first. It was clear something was weighing heavily on Chris’ mind and Yuri didn’t exactly have the mental fortitude in that moment to go digging for whatever it was.

Chris shifted around in the chair for a minute or two, obviously waiting for Yuri to go on, but Yuri stayed resolutely silent. Maybe it was how tired he was, or maybe it was one of those times when his typically scare confidence showed back up again for brief flashes, but whatever the case was, Chris had come to Yuri and not the other way around and Yuri was not about to let that advantage go while he had it.

“I… I wasn’t supposed to be there.” Chris folded his hands in his lap and turned his full attention to Yuri. “I don’t… I don’t think Victor wanted you to find out about my involvement in this like that. It wasn’t his fault…”

“I didn’t think it was. He looked fairly surprised himself to see you there.” Yuri picked idly at a loose thread at the hem of his shirt. “Do you often sneak out of the palace on the spur of the moment without letting anyone know where you’re going?”

“No. Not often, and Otabeck knew where I was. He was the one that had to take me in the first place.” Chris hesitated for a moment before going on. “I know I’ve been a little, well, sensitive lately, and I needed to go reconnect with my friends out there for my own peace of mind. That and I needed to send a message to my father without having to worry about whoever sensors our outgoing mail here getting their hands on it first.”

“Chris, not to be rude, but whatever reasons you were there are your reasons.” Yuri raised an eyebrow in Chris’ direction as he went on. “You don’t have to worry about me giving up your secret or trying to blackmail you or anything like that.”

“Oh, um, thanks.” Chris still looked a little nervous and Yuri was starting to feel more and more confused the longer the other man refused to relax. What other reason could Chris have for coming
to find Yuri for a private conversation than to make sure Yuri was going to keep his word not to betray the secret he’d learned in the light of day and after he’d had more time to process everything?

Unless…

“Alright. Then why are you here, if it’s not that?” Yuri gave up on letting Chris come to him. Neither of them had the time to sit there in this awkward stalemate for however long it took for Chris to give up his real reason for seeking Yuri out. “I’m pretty sure you’re not here only to make me lose out on an extra hour and a half of sleep I desperately need.”

“I guess I was hoping to maybe clear the air some.” Chris still seemed nervous, but his voice was calm and sure. “Look, Yuri, you’re a good man, and I really do like you. I don’t want to ruin any friendship that could form between us, and I honestly look forward to working with you once this whole stupid sideshow is over.”

“I, um, like being your friend, too.” Yuri offered up that declaration with only a minimal amount of hesitation. He did like Chris. To the point where he had to admit they probably would have become much closer as friends a lot faster under different circumstances… But these weren’t different circumstances and Yuri was suddenly painfully aware of exactly what conversation Chris wanted to have. “So… Exactly how long have you been friends with Victor?”

Chris cringed. He probably hadn’t expected Yuri to be so direct. Normally he would have been correct in that assumption. Yuri usually hated the direct route, but Yuri was also tired, overwhelmed, and not in the mood to play a game of back and forth.

Besides, he figured that after you’d spent an early morning sneaking back into a highly guarded and secure palace with a person, it kind of changed your relationship in a way that went beyond traditional niceties.

“We met for the first time about six years ago when I moved here for university, but I would say we didn’t really become friends until about four years ago.” Chris paused and Yuri got the impression that he was thinking through something in his head. “Yeah. About four years sounds right. It’s hard to tell sometimes. Josef introduced us my first year in Angeles but King Yakov didn’t give us permission to read Victor into anything regarding rebels or rebellions until a few years later. We were friendly enough before that, but I would say we definitely got closer once I was able to let him in on my secret.”

Yuri nodded to show he was following along, but he didn’t say anything. Not until he had more of the story. Or, maybe it was more like he didn’t trust himself to say anything right then. Not until he
could respond with logic and not this new emotion he could already feel welling up within him.

Yuri never had been a jealous person, but, then again, had he ever had anything worth being jealous over before?

“I…” Chris took a deep breath as though he was steeling himself to say something difficult for him to properly articulate. “I guess I really need to give you some of my background in order to go forward from here. I just… I just want you to understand where we were coming from when we agreed… When we agreed…”

“When you agreed to enter the Selection and maybe end up marrying Victor at the end of it.” Yuri supplied the second half of Chris’ stumbling explanation blandly. Though he immediately felt bad about it from the way Chris’ face instantly fell as soon as the words had left his mouth. Bad enough that he could help but scramble to try and do some damage control. “I’m sorry. That was… That was mean. You don’t deserve that.”

“No, I probably do.” Chris truly didn’t seem offended at all. In fact, he didn’t even seem as nervous as he’d been only a moment prior. “We were stupid when we thought this might have been a good idea. I can see that pretty clearly now. Of course, it made sense at the time. We thought we had all the bases covered. Well, all the ones we’d bothered to think about in any case. The people I worked with could rest easy knowing they wouldn’t end up with someone who might try to push Victor down another path as a Royal Consort. I would end up with access and means to work on what was important to me and Victor would have someone he counted as a friend to rely on. Neither one of us thought someone like you might be Selected. Someone he could really fall in love with.”

There it was. That word Yuri had been avoiding like the plague since it had first popped into his mind at the ball over a month ago by then. That one word that changed everything and turned Yuri’s entire world on its head whenever he heard it or thought about it.

“I don’t, if that helps. Love him, I mean.” If Chris had seen or sensed how Yuri had tensed with the familiar choking panic he was prone to, he didn’t let on. “He’s a great guy and handsome enough that I wouldn’t turn him down if I ran into him on the street or something like that, but I don’t love him. Not in any way other than as a close friend.”

“That’s… Ah, well… Um… Thanks for saying that?” Yuri fumbled with his words in a way that was less common for him these days. How was it that he could give a smooth and perfectly articulated opinion about a budgetary inquiry that he barely understood on live television, and yet still falter so badly here?
It felt so backwards, but Yuri supposed it made a sad kind of ironic sense. He had always been shit at recognizing and acknowledging his emotions even inside his own head. He wasn’t sure why he expected it would be any easier to say them out loud.

“No problem.” Again, Chris breezed past Yuri discomfort without drawing any attention to it and Yuri mentally thanked him for it. “I personally think you two are good for each other. For what it’s worth, Victor and I would have been terrible together. We’re both too idealistic. I take things too personally and he wants desperately to fix everything and make everyone happy… It… It wouldn’t have been a good match. Seeing the way the two of you are together makes that all the more obvious. You ground him in a good way, in a way I wouldn’t be able to. I just wish I’d noticed it sooner. Might have made all of our lives a little easier.”

“Uh huh.” Yuri grunted in a non-committal response. This was not at all something he had been prepared to discuss today. He wasn’t sure if he ever could be prepared to discuss it at all… Which meant it was time for a subject change. “You never did explain why you are involved with the rebels. Victor, I can understand. This is going to be his country and his responsibility someday… But you… You’re a Three and your father is a well-respected local figure. Hell, you’ll probably end up as a Two one way or another. What do you have to gain by altering or eliminating the caste system?”

“Other than being a decent human being that understands it’s not right to step on others for their own gain? Or knowing that any system that holds people down for a reasons as stupid as which family they happened to be born into might be the wrong one?” Yuri felt a warm blush creep over his face and it was suddenly impossible to look Chris in the eye. “You are kind of right, though. From the outside it doesn’t look like I have a lot to benefit from the total collapse of the current societal makeup, do I?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Yuri shot back stubbornly. It was an empty gesture. They both knew he had meant it exactly like that. What he’d said hadn’t been very well thought out at all, but he’d meant it even as he now wanted to take it back. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t pry. It’s not my business.”

“No, it’s not, but I suppose I can tell you anyway. As an olive branch and because I think it might help you see why this movement is so very necessary.” Chris winked at him and Yuri turned serious in the wake of the gesture. Despite Chris trying to hide now behind his normal, jovial front, Yuri knew this was important. The least he could do was not fuck this part up, too. “It looked like you were a tad bit hesitant to sign up for the cause back there.”

Yuri was sure he could come up with any number of excuses for that, some of them more truthful than others, but he didn’t. It wouldn’t have felt right. Not with Chris offering to give Yuri what he’d asked for even though he didn’t have to and Yuri was fairly certain he didn’t deserve it.

“All good stories start with either love or money. Mine started with love.” Chris might not have
wanted an audience, but he as apparently going to play to the one he had anyway. “And I do mean that in the literal sense. My dad spent a long time avoiding falling in love. School came first, and then work after that. He kept telling himself there would be time for romance later. You know how the old story goes.”

Yuri nodded in agreement because, yes, yes he did know how that story went. He was intimately familiar with it. He knew he could be oblivious at times when it came to noticing people flirting with him, but there had been more than a few occasions where people hadn’t been too shy to cut to the chase and ask Yuri out when their subtler hints went unnoticed.

He always had turned them down. Getting coffee with a boy, nice or otherwise, was an hour of studio time sacrificed. A dinner date was time that could have been spent stretching or reviewing his old tapes and scouring them for places that could use improvement.

So he understood that part of Chris’ tale instantly and acutely.

“Dad was always a Three, but he wasn’t always as successful as he is now. It took some time for him to build himself up, but he got there eventually. Hard work really does pay off and all that jazz, except it literally was hard work. Hard work and long hours and coming home to a dusty house and an empty fridge.” Here Chris’ smirk took on a sardonic edge. “An empty life, too, but he wasn’t quite at the point of thinking about it that way.”

“My grandmother convinced him to hire a maid. Someone to clean during the day while he was gone and make sure he had at least one good meal ready for him when he came home.” Chris let out a dramatic sigh, clearly getting into the story by that point. “I’m sure you’ve seen romance movies. Illicit love affairs between the classes. A feisty Six catches the eye of an aloof and driven Three and they are both whisked off into a whirlwind romance for the ages. Those movies always do so well at the box office.”

Yuri shrugged. “I never was one to waste time and money on movies, but I’ve seen a few. My best friend back home used to force us to go to matinees on Sundays sometimes.”

It had been so long ago. Almost a lifetime away when they had all been young and innocent and barely beginning to choose a path towards their dreams, but Yuri did remember it.

He also remembered how much those movies got wrong.
“Yes, well, in a perfect movie ending, my father would have bought my mother’s way into being a Three. On film, it seems so simple. Fill out some paperwork, grab a cashier’s check from the bank, and a month later the credits roll on a sunset beach with a pair of rings and a vow for forever.” There was a tinge of bitterness to Chris’ words. The tone of a person who had seen the same scene play out so often he could see the ending coming from a mile away. A tone that Yuri could feel deep in his soul as he knew before Chris could say another word that the ending wasn’t going to be a happy one at all.

Few of them ever truly were. He just hadn’t quite expected bright and positive and self-assured Chris, of all people, to know that lesson quite so well.

“The movies don’t show you the number of zeroes they expect to see on those cashier’s checks. They don’t cover trusted political advisors outright sabotaging your paperwork and urging caution. The don’t show the late night conversations with disappointed parents who beg you to reconsider or at least wait for a non-election year.” Chris was sitting rigid in his seat and Yuri subconsciously mirrored his position from his own spot on the bed. “They also don’t tell you what to do when your back-alley contraceptives fail and your secret girlfriend ends up carrying your illegal love child.”

“Someone should make a guide for that.” Chris plowed on without waiting to see if Yuri had a reaction to his revelation. “I don’t have the concrete numbers on how often it happens, but I’ll bet that number is high.”

Yuri thought of his own home then. Of three sweet girls who had been so close to losing everything for the simple crime of daring to be conceived. Of daring to be born to an unwed mother. His heart clenched painfully and he prayed that Chris hadn’t noticed how close to home he’d actually struck.

“They married her off to someone. Another Six who was fine with holding his tongue so long as his bank account stayed full.” If anything, the bitterness in Chris’ voice had intensified. “Did you know you that I was adopted?”

Yuri blinked in surprise at Chris’ sudden question. He swallowed hard and somehow managed to stammer out a weak ‘no’.

“My mother died a few days after I was born from complications and her new husband packed up and left the day after that. Seem like he didn’t exactly sign up to raise me on his own no matter what the price he’d been offered.” At that moment Chris sounded hollow and Yuri had to push back the strong urge to get up and find some way to comfort him. For all he knew, Chris didn’t want to be comforted and Yuri truly didn’t know what to do even if he did. “Marrying a Six didn’t look good, but adopting your former maid’s child when its supposed father had abandoned it? That’s political gold right there.”
“And that’s the story of how my biological father became my adoptive father and decided he needed to figure out a way to make sure shit that stupid stopped happening.”

Now that Chris’ tale was done, he was looking towards Yuri almost expectantly. Yuri knew the polite thing to do would be to make some kind of comment, or even just thank Chris for sharing what was obviously a painful part of his past. Yes, that would be the polite thing to do and, while Yuri often felt some of his personal interactions ended up lacking, he did strive to at least be polite.

Too bad Yuri didn’t have anything he could say, polite or otherwise. Chris had left him completely speechless.

Chris seemed to notice that immediately and his grin softened some. “Dad never hid anything from me. He’s always been of the firm opinion that our generation is going to be the catalyst for change. He always hoped I would be at the center of the movement somehow, but there are other ways to do it than this.”

“You’d be good at it… At, um, this.” Yuri’s throat was suddenly dry and scratchy all of a sudden, but he swallowed hard and pushed on. “You’re… You’re a lot better at it than I am, and you know what you’re fighting for. I… I wish I could be as sure as you.”

“I’ve had about two decades to sort through what I want to accomplish with my life and how to do it.” Chris’ laugh was deep and real and everything Yuri needed to ground himself back in the moment at hand instead of drifting untethered through his murky and scrambled thoughts. “And, as much as you deny it, probably even to yourself, it’s painfully obvious to everyone else…”

“You know exactly who you’re fighting for.”
Strength

Chapter Notes

Well, it looks like I might have a final chapter count at long last. You know, if these chapters don't continue to spiral out of control on me in terms of length like they keep doing... Hahaha...

I'd like to give one massive shout out and thanks to every single person who has read, commented, and left kudos. All of you have made this entire experience worth it! Hopefully things have calmed down enough that I can get into a more regular writing schedule... Work is back to normal, but I've added two new horses to my rotation other than my own. One's a super cute little pony I'm schooling because she's for sale and we need to keep her on point for when people want to come try her out and another is an adorable little green mustang cross that I'm putting miles on in the hopes of working him into the lesson program at my barn. So I'm replacing my work hours with barn hours. Lol.

I've also added some tags. I'm not really going to actually specifically tag any of the background relationships because from Yuri's POV he doesn't really get a good view into them, but I'm planning on developing some of them more when I write Victor's POV companion piece... Which I already have outlined so it's definitely a thing that's going to happen! ^_^

Chapter 26 - Strength

You already know who you are fighting for.

Those words ricocheted around Yuri’s mind for the rest of the day. Chris’ deliberate word choice taunting him long after the other man had left and Yuri had completed his routine to get ready for the rest of his day.

You already know who you’re fighting for.

Victor…

Of course, it was Victor. It was pointless to pretend it could have ever been anyone else, not even in the privacy and safety of his own mind. Not even in his most stubborn moments.
Not what he was fighting for. That was all secondary now and Yuri’s heart had known it long before his head. The ‘what’ had never been important to Yuri, not for a long time now. If he cared to think about it, he was sure he could trace his shift in perspective back to a night in May when the air was still only carrying the barest hint of the summer that was to come.

The night when a Crown Prince had tried to help a complete stranger through a panic attack in the muddy grass beneath a willow tree.

The night when Victor had seen him at his worst and chose to take a chance on him anyway.

He was sure there were others that would have tried to point out that it had started much sooner than that. They would remind him of the clippings of Victor’s handsome face tacked to his dorm room walls. They would say it was obvious in the way Yuri had chosen to name his dog. There were dancers who knew that Yuri would send a quick glance towards the Royal Box, high above the performance hall, before he’d go on stage every night, knowing he wouldn’t be able to see if there was anyone inside between the bright lights and the far distance. Knowing that and still always wondering, and maybe even hoping just a little bit, that there might be a Crown Prince up there who’s eyes would follow him as he danced.

It was odd now, to know that they would all be wrong.

No, not about the facts. Unfortunately, all of those embarrassing tidbits about his past was true. What they would be wrong about was what it had all meant.

Back then, Yuri had been admiring Victor from afar. All he’d seen was what everyone else saw. He saw a handsome face, well-crafted smiles, a voice that could command and soothe in equal measures, and an innate confidence that Yuri longed for and often found missing in his own life.

For all that, he like Victor well enough. No more or no less than anyone else who held onto new clippings. He wasn’t after all, the only person to name a pet after a member of the Royal Family and he was he was far from the last.

But now… Now he knew that there were tiny creases in the corners of Victor’s eyes that deepened when he really smiled. Now he knew how much the prince really loved his dog. He’d seen Victor sprawled out on the grass covered in dog slobber and grass stains and laughing so hard he could barely breathe. Now he’d been close enough to see the flecks of sea glass green at the center of Victor’s irises ad the light dusting of freckles across the bridge of his nose that would appear when Victor’s concealer would smudge.
Now Yuri knew what it felt like to kiss him and hold him. He knew what Victor’s face looked like when he was scared, nervous, or uncertain. He knew how painful and hard it was for Victor to voice his doubts and fears and how relieved Victor had been whenever Yuri had accepted those fears and doubts without judgement or hesitation.

Who are you fighting for?

Yuri’s heart knew who. Had known for months.

It was time the rest of him knew it, too.

~

Phichit was waiting for Yuri just outside the dining hall when he’d finally given in to the rumbling in his stomach and he decided to join the world of the living at long last. Of course, Phichit waiting for him didn’t surprise him in the slightest. He was actually more surprised the other man hadn’t come to find him hours ago.

“Yuri!” Phichit perked up and bounced to his side as soon as Yuri was within eyesight. “How are you feeling? Minako said you had some sort of stomach bug and you did look a bit green around the gills last night…”

“I feel much better now.” Yuri assured him. He didn’t even have to force himself into giving a confident grin. For once it was ready and waiting for him just below the surface. He still wished he’d had about an extra five hours of sleep, but other than that he was calm and centered. Sure of himself for the first time since he’d come to the palace. Or, sure of what was important to him now as it was. “I guess I just needed a morning off. It’s been a while since we’ve had one.”

“It sure has been.” Phichit seemed to accept Yuri’s explanation easily enough and Yuri pushed down a sudden pang of guilt. His friend had been worried about him and all Yuri had done so far in the face of that concern was lie to him. Even if it had been a lie of omission, it still felt wrong and Yuri resolved to tell Phichit the truth someday once this was finally over and done with. “You didn’t miss much. JJ’s still trying to convince the rest of us to go along with his festival idea at the National Ballet. Leo and I are still pretty convinced he’s trying to win over the queen by benefitting something important to her, but… Well, it’s not a bad idea.”
“Yeah, I guess it’s not.” Yuri wasn’t sure how he felt about JJ’s suggestion of holding a festival for the benefit of the National Ballet that culminated in an evening showcase of some of their current premier dancers. He’d honestly hoped someone would have come up with something better by now, but that wasn’t something he cared to worry about right that second. Not when there was nothing even close to being set in stone about that particular proposal yet. “I’m sure we could come up with something better if we tried.”

“I think Guang Hong might have said he had a different idea. We can talk to him about it later.” Phichit grabbed Yuri’s upper arm as Yuri had taken Phichit’s statement as a cue to try and continue on into the dining hall. “Wait. I’ve been waiting to talk to you all morning. Come with me to the library?”

“Phichit… Can it wait until after lunch?” On the one hand, Phichit was Yuri’s friend, his best friend at the palace really. It wasn’t often Phichit tried to pull him aside, and, when he did, it was typically for something important.

On the other hand, Yuri hadn’t eaten anything since the night before and he was starving.

As though his body wanted to make that point perfectly clear in case his brain got any funny ideas about skipping this meal too, his stomach let out a loud whine. Yuri didn’t even have the ability to be embarrassed about it for once, even though it caused Phichit to instantly break out into hysterical giggles.

“Alright, how about this? Will you come with me to the library if I have someone bring us food?” Phichit pumped a fist in the air in victory as Yuri let out a defeated sigh and nodded. “Awesome. Let me just go call for one of my attendants…”

“Are we even allowed to eat in the library?” Yuri wasn’t entirely sure he’d ever seen anyone with anything other than a bottle of water in that room and he knew some of the books could be considered rare. Not that he thought they were going there to eat and read, but he wasn’t sure if any of the guard or maids would understand the distinction. “Why don’t we go to the dance studio instead?”

“That’s a much better idea!” Phichit clapped his hands together and bounced in place. “Okay. Go ahead. I’ll get some food and meet you there in five?”

“Um… Sure.” Yuri watched as Phichit skipped off before the words even really had a chance to leave his mouth.
There was nothing left to do but turn around and walk away from the dining hall and towards the dance studio. He had no idea what had gotten into Phichit. The other man seemed as chipper and bright as ever, but it wasn’t like him at all to pull Yuri away from everyone else on purpose like this. Sure, they’d spent more time alone together in the past few weeks than they had before, but it was never done by either of them with the intent to leave anyone else out of the conversation and their friends would often come and go periodically whenever they were hanging out together.

It was odd for Phichit to seek him out quite like this ad Yuri couldn’t help but worry there was something wrong. He had absolutely no reason to think that way, but not having a reason had never stopped his anxiety from lurching into motion and today did not look to be the exception to that rule.

Yuri didn’t have to wait long for Phichit to show up with a tray of sandwiches held in front of him. Yuri’s barely had enough time to pace around the room twice and he stopped immediately as soon as the door closed behind his friend’s back.

“Hmmm…” Phichit surveyed the room as though he were looking for something. “There’s not any tables in here, is there?”

“Nope.” Yuri shrugged and he made his way over to the mirror and plopped down at its base, crossing his legs underneath him and leaning back against it. “Come on. They keep these floors just as spotless as everything else around here and eating on a studio floor hasn’t killed me yet. I doubt it’ll kill you either.”

“Fair point.” Phichit hurried to take a spot across from Yuri and placed the tray between them. “Sorry for dragging you out here, but I couldn’t think of a better time when the others would all be distracted.”

“It’s fine. So long as I get to eat, I don’t care.” Yuri almost thought about thanking Phichit, too. He actually wasn’t entirely thrilled about being around the others just yet, but doing so would only lead to Phichit asking questions Yuri had no way to answer, so he held his tongue. “What’s up?”

“Nothing really. I’m just worried about you.” Now it was Phichit’s turn to shrug as they both grabbed a sandwich from the tray. “How are you feeling for real? Like honestly. Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.” Yuri was quick to reassure his friend. At that point, it really was the truth. Everything was fine, or as close to fine as it had ever been since this whole thing had started. At
least, he hoped everything was fine. He was suddenly completely aware that he had yet to really talk to Victor yet, but he really didn’t think he had the capacity to worry about that right then. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“It’s just, well… I’ve noticed you tend to get ‘sick’ whenever something big or crazy is about to or already has happened, so…” Phichit smiled softly and waved the hand currently not holding food through the air. “Minako said you were sick this morning… You can see where I might be a little worried.”

“What? That… That can’t be true.” Out of all the things he’d briefly considered Phichit might want to talk about, that was not even close to one of them. “I mean, it’s not true. Definitely not true.”

“Come on, Yuri. I’ve seen you lie more convincingly than that. That was totally weak.” Phichit laughed, no longer projecting an air of concern openly, but Yuri would have been stupid to think it wasn’t still lingering there under the surface of Phichit’s naturally bubbly personality. “There is no way you really think I believed that, right?”

“I wish you would.” Yuri mumbled under his breath, but there was no venom to it. Phichit was a nosy friend, yes, but he was a nosy friend that actually cared. That made all the difference. “Everything is fine, though. No more scandals. I promise.”

“Ah ha! So you admit all those other times you were faking sick?” Phichit managed to look both excited and smug at the same time and Yuri let out a weak groan. “I knew it! I knew there was something going on whenever you would go missing with some kind of sickness.”

“I don’t do it that often.” Yuri protested as he wracked his brain in an effort to quickly recall exactly when and why he’d been late or taken a day off before. Phichit didn’t even blink, instead staring at Yuri blankly until he gave in. “Okay fine. It might have happened once or twice.”

“And were you actually sick any of those times?” Phichit pressed, clearly enjoying having backed Yuri into a corner.

“Well, one of the times Yuri had been recovering from a particularly nasty panic attack. He figured that one had to count for something.

“Uh-huh.” Phichit looked even less convinced if that was at all possible. “Oh, Yuri. We’ve been through this before. I’m your best friend. You’re contractually obligated to give me all the juicy
details of your secret trysts with Victor. I’ve gotta live vicariously through you right now and you’re not really giving me a lot to work with here.”

“Secret trysts? Really? You’re trying to make it sound like we’re in the plot of some kind of overblown romance novel… And not one of the good ones.” Yuri wasn’t entirely sure why he was deflecting. Probably out of instinct. He’d spent months mentally isolating himself from the other Selected when it came to protecting the privacy of his developing relationship with the prince. It was still hard sometimes not to fall back into that old habit with Phichit even when the logical part of his brain told him that Phichit had yet to, and probably never would, betray him.

“If you’re trying to tell me that you have never met Victor in a dark corridor in the middle of the night for an off-camera make out session, I’m going to have to call bullshit.” Phichit paused as though he was considering something for a second. “Or, if you really haven’t, you have been missing out on the perfect opportunity. I’m not sure which is worse…”

“I… I, um, wouldn’t say that’s never happened.” Yuri admitted after a small moment of hesitation. If Phichit wanted to believe he’d been up late the night before with Victor, what was the harm in letting him? In a way, it was the truth and Phichit wasn’t wrong about Yuri meeting with Victor in private some evenings. “Look, we’ve never done anything we weren’t supposed to do, but we’ve all been so busy lately…”

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed about it at all.” Phichit rolled his eyes and let out a loud sigh. “Let’s be real. You two are practically already engaged. There is zero reason you should feel guilty or like you have to hide how much time you really spend with him. Most of the rest of us have given up anyway.”

“We’re not engaged, though, and the Selection isn’t officially over yet.” Yuri pointed out even though it caused an acute ache in his heart just to say the words. “You might not try to accuse us of anything, but someone else might. It’s never that simple and you know it.”

“Hmmm…” Phichit had put down his half-eaten lunch and was looking at Yuri closely. “Well, at least you aren’t outright denying that the two of you are going to get engaged anymore. That’s gotta be a step in the right direction.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” Yuri admitted, finally able to articulate out loud what he’d already known for weeks, maybe even months by that point. Acknowledging to another person that as long as it was within his power, Yuri was going to stay with Victor. Forever if he was allowed to. “But wanting something and having it happen can be two different things.”
“Forgive me if I sound like an idiot, but I don’t exactly follow what you’re trying to say here.” Phichit had his arms crossed over his chest and he was looking at Yuri in a way that made him squirm a little. “Okay, so I’m to understand that you want to marry him and he wants to marry you, but neither of you have bothered to actually pop the question yet? Why? Honestly, you’ve yet to give me any kind of a good reason for all the hesitation so far.”

“For one, I think you keep forgetting that he hasn’t asked me yet.” That was a half-truth at best. Victor might have never said the words in the traditional order they were usually phrased in, but had asked in some terms and Yuri had never exactly acted enthusiastic about the possibility in return. “And, for another thing, even if he had, the media advisors aren’t going to let it happen in a dark hallway at midnight with no cameras around, now are they?”

“Wow… I totally thought you were going to try and walk that back again.” Phichit’s eyes were wide as he shook his head in disbelief. “What changed? You never used to be this open about Victor. Not even with me.”

“I’ve had some time to think.” Yuri shrugged. “I guess there’s no point in hiding the fact that I have strong feelings for him this late in the game. Besides, it’s not like you’ve believed me when I’ve tried to deny it any other time.”

“Hallelujiah! He can be taught!” Phichit threw his hands in the air and Yuri tried to hide his snort of laughter by following it up with a hard eye roll. “Now, I know they’re going to try and plan everything for you, but I demand to be your best man at the wedding. I think I’ve more than earned it.”

“I wouldn’t start planning a wedding yet.” Yuri stated dully as he fiddled with his napkin. “Feelings don’t always seem to matter where politicians are concerned. If the right person puts up a fuss… It might not happen.”

That had been bothering him even after speaking with Chris that morning. Not that he thought there was any part of Chris that still wanted to go through with their original plan of marrying Victor to forge more permanent ties between the rebellion and the Royal Family. Of that he was certain.

What he wasn’t so sure of was if the other people involved in the plot felt the same way. It wasn’t like Chris had been placed at the palace without some amount of help from various parties. Those parties might not take too kindly at all to Yuri throwing a wrench into their carefully cultivated plans by causing Victor to want to marry him instead. Yuri didn’t even know who all, or any, of them might be or how much power they really held and he was fairly sure Chris wouldn’t give them up even if he did know who they were in the first place.
Not to mention the fact that it was painfully obvious the other side of the field didn’t necessarily have warm, fuzzy feelings where he was concerned either. The media advisors had made even less and less of an attempt to hide that they were starting to worry that Yuri might take the grand prize, and he knew without having to ask that they weren’t exactly happy about the thought of having someone at Victor’s side that they had yet to be able to control.

With all that going on, for all he knew, the game might have already been won by someone else before he’d even gotten the chance to play.

“If you feel that way, you really need to start reading some of those magazines Yurio keeps finding a way to sneak in.” Phichit shook his head in the way that made Yuri feel like Phichit couldn’t quite figure out why he was being such an idiot. “I know they always say not to read your own press, but this time is worth the exception.”

“You know I avoid those on purpose. I don’t need or want to know what the magazines are saying about me.” Yuri had firmly and adamantly refused to read anything snuck into the palace. Part of him knew it wasn’t good to always stay inside his little bubble, but he didn’t care. He’d had more than enough of reading about what others thought of him after the last scandal. He had no desire to go down that rabbit hole ever again. “The last thing any of us need is more unfounded gossip in our lives.”

“Okay, I get that and I respect it, but there’s more to some of these articles that just gossip…” Phichit snapped his fingers. “Shoot. I gave my copy of the last one to Chris the other day, too. I wonder if he still has it…”

Yuri opened his mouth to protest once more when Phichit brightened up and snapped his fingers again. “Ah-ha! I’ll bet Yurio has some squirreled away in here still.”

Phichit did not wait to see what, if anything, Yuri had to say to that exclamation. He leapt to his feet and raced over to the equipment closet, flinging pads and other odds and ends to the side in his search.

“Jackpot!” It only took about three minutes for Phichit to emerge from the back of the closet with a moderately sized stack of magazines gripped in his hands. “Remind me to give that sullen, little shit a hug the next time I see him.”

“That I will definitely do, if only to get the chance to see him kick you into the stratosphere.” Yuri figured Phichit would have deserved it, so he might as well enjoy the show. “You really don’t have to show me those. I’m really fine without seeing them.”
“No, Yuri, I really do.” Phichit plopped back down into the spot he’d vacated on the floor and moved the lunch tray out of the way so he could fan out the magazines between them. “If you are thinking that anyone out there would be thrilled to see you go home, or anything other than disappointed, you’ve got another thing coming, buddy.”

“You cannot seriously be trying to tell me there isn’t a single negative thing about me in these…” Yuri mentally counted Phichit’s haul. “Nine magazines? I find that awfully hard to believe.”

“Okay, I didn’t say that. That’s impossible.” Phichit laughed and shook his head. “They even managed to find a negative thing or two to say about me, if you can believe it.”

“Now that I don’t believe.” Yuri joked and he laughed nervously along with Phichit at his own attempt to lighten the mood. “If they’re finding something bad to say about you, how am I supposed to believe anything else they say?”

“You’re just going to have to take my word for it, then.” Phichit stated smugly. “I’ve got nothing to gain by lying to you.”

“Hmm…” Yuri took a deep breath and prayed that Phichit either couldn’t tell his hands were shaking, or would be kind enough not to point out they were if he did. “Well, you aren’t going to let me wiggle out of it… Unless you are…”

“Don’t test me, Katsuki. I know about your bad knee and I will tackle you.” The sad thing was that Yuri had absolutely zero illusions that Phichit might have been messing around or exaggerating in any way. Instead of offering another threat, his friend smiled sweetly and rearranged the magazines in a different order. “There. We’ve got a pretty good selection here. I’d say we start with the earliest and work our way up.”

“That as solid a plan as any.” Yuri grumbled to himself as he picked up the first magazine Phichit slid towards him. “I would just like for it to go on the record that I am doing this under protest.”

“Protest noted and ignored.” Phichit crossed his legs underneath him and clapped his hands together. “That one’s a good one, by the way. It’s the issue they put out after you escaped the library.”

“We didn’t escape…”
“Yes, you did.” Phichit cut Yuri off and held up his hands to stop his from trying to divert the conversation any further. “Read it. Look at the pictures. They’re actually pretty good in this issue. If you still want to complain after you’re done, I’ll allow you to do it then.”

Yuri mumbled something that was more unintelligible grunting that actual words, but he looked down at the magazine’s cover anyway, despite every self-preservation instinct he had trying to convince him to throw it across the room and make a break for it. Surely Yuri was faster than Phichit…

Nope. Better no to risk it. Phichit could be surprisingly strong and quick and Yuri’s knee was actually feeling pretty good lately. He’d hate himself more if he hurt it again than if he just did as Phichit told him to.

He ran his eyes over the glossy cover in his hands. He recognized the title as belonging to a magazine that at least had a decent reputation. It certainly wasn’t bargain bin gossip rap material, and that knowledge let Yuri relax a little.

There was a picture of Yuri and Victor that had been recycled from the previous issue where they’d done the formal photoshoots. It was one of the better photos in Yuri’s opinion. One where Yuri was leaning back against Victor’s broad chest and looking up at him, both of them smiling at what Yuri remembered to have been a particularly bad joke on Victor’s part. Underneath were bold letters proclaiming an inside scoop and exclusive photos from the prince’s first date in the city.

“Oh no… This is everything from what happened with the library thing?” Yuri definitely did not regret that afternoon at all. It had been one of the best days of his life, but that didn’t mean he looked fondly on the lecture he had received afterwards and this article had likely done nothing more than throw fuel on the fire of the king’s eternal bad mood.

“Yup. They got every frame they could find from the library thing, as you so eloquently put it.” Phichit supplied helpfully. “I actually am super jealous about that, by the way. When they made Victor take me out we just walked through an art gallery for an hour and a half. He wouldn’t even run away with me for an adventure no matter how hard I begged. Granted, they made us take like fifteen guards specifically to stop that from happening again, but still. He could have at least tried…”

“Uh huh…” Yuri grunted in response as he flipped the magazine open to the right page after a brief hesitation. “One of these days we need to go into town together and I’ll show you around some.”
“I’m going to hold you to that promise, friend.” Phichit chirped and then fell silent, allowing Yuri to focus on the article in front of him without further distraction.

There were pictures scattered across the pages. Candid shot that must have been submitted by people who had seen them out on the street and managed to grab a shot or two when they hadn’t been looking. Each and every one had Victor and Yuri prominently displayed in the foreground.

Laughing as they ate ice cream underneath a large umbrella at a table on the ice cream parlor’s back patio. Victor using their joined hands to point out some kind of landmark in the distance as they walked down the street. Sitting under the shade of the trees in the park so close their foreheads were almost touching and not paying the slightest bit of attention to anyone or anything else.

Yuri had to admit that they looked good together. Happy and relaxed even with the obvious form of Yurio sulking with his arms crossed in the background of some of the photos.

Any other the other times Yuri had seen articles like this, he’d been too rushed or too scared to really read the words that accompanied the pictures. This time, however, he was kind of curious. Not that he thought Phichit would let him get away with looking and not reading even if he hadn’t felt the pull of curiosity.

It… Well, it wasn’t bad. Yuri wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but Phichit had been right. Most of it was positive. There was idle speculation about why there hadn’t been an announcement of the date and a small paragraph featuring a read interview where the person gushed about it being a spontaneous romantic gesture. There was a rough outline of where they’d wandered on their date and some back and forth about their disguises.

Only one tiny line, added towards the end almost like an afterthought, was about them wasting time and resources that could have been better spent somehow, but nothing too terrible at all. Someone had even managed to track down the owner of the clothing store they’d been to who had given a one page, glowing interview, including emphasizing how Yuri had refused to take anything for free and had insisted on paying for everything himself.

Apparently, that had been taken as another grand romantic gesture.

All in all, Yuri supposed it could have been worse and he said as much to Phichit.

“Told you.” Phichit stated smugly. “Most of the others are exactly like that one. Um, one or two of
them sometimes make fun of your clothes, but they do that to all of us. Which is, quite frankly, totally ridiculous and unfair since the palace stylists pick our wardrobe, but whatever.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t seem fair at all.” Yuri was stunned. He’d thought there’d at least be something. Which kind of struck him as ridiculous in its own right. He was pretty sure most people didn’t want to have bad things written about them, and he wasn’t an exception, but it almost made him more suspicious that there wasn’t anything at all. “Seriously? They’re all like that?”

“Yeah. More or less. Hmmm… Oh!” Phichit pointed to one in the middle. “That one had a pretty heated debate about whether you look hotter with or without your glasses. They did a poll. It got ugly, but it ended up being split about 50/50 after some pretty venomous back and forth.”

“There is no way my glasses are the only thing people are debating about.” Yuri protest, though he wasn’t even entirely sure why. This should have been a good thing. Why was he always so intent on ruining good things for himself?

“What kind of magazines do you think these are?” Phichit asked with a bright peal of laughter. “The third one on the right had some great pictures of you and Victor dancing at the ball. I don’t think it had a negative thing to say about you either. Sounds like most of the general public are pretty on board with you being their future Royal Consort.”

“Phichit… That’s great and all…” And it really was great. Yuri appreciated the effort Phichit was going through to make him feel better. “But I don’t care if people like me more with or without glasses. That’s not exactly what I was concerned about.”

“Alright. I get that… I wonder if…” Phichit didn’t finish his sentence in favor of jumping back up to his feet and scurrying back to the equipment closet.

Yuri watched him go with mild confusion. He had no idea what else Phichit was hoping to find in there. Another magazine? Something else entirely?

“Come on, come on… Please still be in here…” Phichit’s voice was muffled as it was coming from inside the closet and Yuri watched with no small amount of trepidation. Knowing Phichit, it could have been anything he was looking for.

Right when Yuri was about to give up and ask Phichit was he was looking for, there was a loud shout of triumph followed by Phichit running back over to Yuri and dropping a huge, white paper
into his lap. A newspaper Yuri realized once he’d gotten a closer look at it.

“You wanted serious? Here’s serious.” Phichit sat down again and pulled his previously abandoned sandwich back into his lap. “Although, I’m starting to worry Yurio might be a pack rat. Or a hoarder. I’m not sure which is worth, but that’s from last month.”

Yuri opened his mouth to ask what he could expect from this, but Phichit was chewing a mouthful of food and had on a look that clearly said he would be giving no answers even if he hadn’t been.

Yuri rifled through the paper until he found the article about him. It was on the second page and bled over into the third, taking up the entirety of both pages.

Okay, so it wasn’t just about him. It must have been written after Michele and Seung-Gil had gone home because they weren’t mentioned, but all of the other Elite were, and Phichit was right yet again. The tone of the article was serious and very, very political.

Yuri swallowed thickly. He suddenly regretted this decision very much.

But it was too late to change his mind. Not with Phichit staring at him expectantly from across the way. Not when he had been given exactly what he’d asked for.

It was tempting to jump straight down to the first mention of his own name, but Yuri shoved that impulse down. The last thing he wanted was to read something and freak himself out because he didn’t have the proper context to understand exactly what was trying to be said.

Whoever had written the article, Yuri hadn’t recognized the name at all, was thoughtful and fair. They had as many compliments for each member of the Elite as they did criticisms and the entire piece was focused on reviewing the few roundtable discussions they’d had on *The Report*.

While the author was fair, they did clearly have their favorites and they had praised Georgi on his passionate and well-articulated responses even as they dinged Chris exuding an air of smugness in general that could be construed as off-putting even though Chris often made good points. The author also loved Phichit’s bright attitude, but was wary of the lack of depth in some of his answers and they thought both Leo and Guang Hong had some good ideas, but needed to speak up more often so as not to be overshadowed by more gregarious candidates like JJ, who they described as having some outlandish ideas that could have been said more for the attention they would gain that any true validity, but the confidence to make it seem like he could pull them off anyway. Even Emil had an
entire paragraph dedicated to praising his calm aura, but expressing a desire to see him show more passion with his answers and push back more instead of often going along with the crowd.

Though, it did make Yuri feel a little better to know that everyone had their strengths and weaknesses pointed out by the time he’d reached where his name popped up for the first time.

Well, they hadn’t thought he looked nervous and they hadn’t thought he was too quiet, which were both things Yuri usually worried about. They did remark that he looked less polished compared to everyone else at the table. Normally that would have caused a swoop of disappointment, but it had been phrased in a way that almost made Yuri think the writer was trying to pay him some kind of backhanded compliment. At least, in enough of a way that it left him more confused than really upset.

“Huh… ‘Yuri Katsuki typically gives grounded answers and often brings a unique point of view to the table, presumably due to being a Five and a working dancer with the National Ballet before being Selected. Only time will tell if that unique point of view might be allowed to go on in the, sometimes stifling, political climate of today.’” Yuri quoted, eyes still glued to the paper in front of him. “That’s a bit of a… Stronger opinion than I thought it would be.”

“Yeah, and a brave one at that. I’m kind of impressed they actually ran the story with that still in there to be honest.” Phichit paused for a second and he chewed and swallowed his last bite of food. “Chris told me the journalist and editor have since been relegated to the Life and Style section until the newspaper can be sure there isn’t going to be a lasting backlash from the media advisors.”

Yuri sputtered for a minute as he tried to think of something to say. He had roughly eight exclamations and about fifteen questions and no way to sort through them in an acceptable amount of time to give a response.

Phichit seemed to take pity on him after a few second and filled the awkward silence between them as easily as if they had merely been discussing the weather.

“Look, Yuri. I’m not blind and my second-best friend here is Chris who is some sort of crazy political activist in his spare time from what I can tell… Actually, the less I know about that the better. God, Chris is so chatty when he’s drunk.” Phichit grimaced and shook his head. “And clingy. Anyway, as I said, the less I know about that the better. The point is that whatever you’re worried about, you shouldn’t be. Most people think you and Victor are absolutely adorable together and they respect you enough to risk their careers to let others know they should respect you, too. Not to add any pressure on you, but you’re some kind of weird beacon of hope for some people.”
“Not to mention you and Victor are totally head over heels in love with each other.” Phichit tacked on, as though that was the most important point and, as such, rendered all of parts before it null and void. Shit, maybe Phichit had a point there. Worrying about everything else felt like it was starting to give Yuri an ulcer. “Did any of this remotely help?”

“Oh…” That was the million dollar question, wasn’t it? Phichit had given Yuri exactly what he’d asked for and then some. More than he’d obviously even intended to give. Now it was entirely up to Yuri to decide if the answers had been worth it. “Do you really spend that much time with Chris?”

Okay, that wasn’t all the question Yuri should have asked or even any kind of statement Phichit might have been expecting, but it was something he’d never thought about before. It was the first one that popped into his head, though. Everything else he felt like he needed to internalize for a bit before bringing it up again. Maybe even hash it out with Victor. What he had said… Well, it was dumb, but it was the best deflection he could come up with on the fly.

To Phichit’s credit, he went ahead and rolled with it after about only ten seconds of surprised silence, letting out a loud bark of laughter punctuated by yet another eye roll.

“Yeah. He’s the only one up for late night kitchen raids. Guang Hong and Leo are too scared of accidentally breaking the rules.” Phichit shrugged. “He’s pretty decent company so long as you keep him out of the liquor.”

“Duly noted.” Yuri was almost tempted to ask why Phichit never bothered him to go on those particular endeavors, but his friend beat him to the punch and answered before Yuri could make up his mind.

“You know… I did try to go to your room once or twice to drag you along, but you never were there.” Phichit had both eyebrows raised and Yuri bit back the urge to groan and bury his face in his hands. “Minako always said you got restless at night sometimes and would go for a walk or to the studio… That was not at all where you were going, was it?”

“Hey, sometimes that’s the truth. Not always, but still…” It was a token protest and they both knew it as they laughed. Yuri, figuring it was about time the shoe was on the other foot as far as Phichit’s teasing was concerned, pressed on. “Are you sure we shouldn’t be more worried about you? You’re the one that’s sneaking around with another man in the middle of the night in secret…”

It had been meant to be a tease. A joke. Yuri hadn’t been serious at all. He’d expected for Phichit to brush it off, or maybe play it up for a minute before breaking down into laughter again and then moving on.
What he hadn’t expected was for Phichit to blush and proceed to avoid eye contact for a second too long…

“No way…” Yuri couldn’t tell if he was excited about finally catching Phichit off-guard or excited for a completely different reason, but he figured the base reasoning didn’t quite matter too much in the moment. “And you keep saying I’ve been holding out on you!”

“You have been!” Phichit shot back, though he sounded more amused than upset, which was something Yuri was glad for. “Granted I have been, too, but… Alright. We’ve both been bad, secret-keeping best friends. Agree to do better going forward?”

“Seems fair.” Yuri held out his hand and Phichit took it and gave it a firm shake. “Agree to do better.”

“Now… About those secret meetings…”

~

Spending time with Phichit had been exactly what he’d needed. Yuri left the dance studio feeling calmer and more determined than he’d felt in weeks.

It helped that, for once, his mind was completely made up. It didn’t happen often, but those rare times when Yuri made a concrete decision, he stuck with it. For better or worse. No matter how nervous it might make him down the line. Once his mind was made, it was not easily unmade.

They were supposed to have a meeting with Queen Lilia after lunch, but Mila was waiting for them once he and Phichit had reached the assigned room.

“The King and Queen have urgent business in the city, so this afternoon’s meeting will have to be postponed. No, I will not be able to tell you what it is or when we can expect them back. Yes, as soon as I’ve gotten a chance to speak with the Queen about a rescheduled time, I’ll let the word along to either you or your attendants.” Mila looked a bit more harried than usual and Yuri got the feeling they were not the first ones she’d had to have this conversation with. “Any other questions?”
“Nope!” Phichit chirped happily before he paused. “Um… Actually, does that mean we have the afternoon to ourselves now?"

Mila let out a tired chuckle. “Oh, yes, yes it does. If anything changes in regards to that either I’ll have your attendants hunt you down. Other than that, you’re free until dinner.”

“Awesome! Thanks, Mila!” Phichit waved as he grabbed Yuri by the upper arm and turned them both around to head back the way they’d come. “There’s some good news. No boring meetings until tomorrow. What should we do with this unexpected gift of free time?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m leaning towards taking a nap. I didn’t sleep well last night… Not for the reason you’re thinking either!” Yuri was quick to cut off whatever Phichit had opened his mouth to say, rightly realizing that his friend’s mischievous grin meant nothing good was going to come out of letting him speak. “You know, Minako’s not entirely wrong. Sometimes I really just can’t sleep. Most often because I’m worrying about something stupid, but sometimes I just get random insomnia. It’s a curse.”

And, then again, sometimes he was out running the roads with a group of secret rebels at one in the morning, but that wasn’t exactly something he was about to tell Phichit, no matter how good of a friend he was.

“Fine, fine. I believe you… This time.” Phichit released Yuri and grinned. “Go take your nap. I’ll see you at dinner?”

“Yeah. See you at dinner.” They parted way at the foot of one of the many back stairs. Yuri headed up and Phichit wandered away back towards the main part of the palace as he mumbled something about hoping Leo and Guang Hong might be hanging out in the Entertaining Room.

Yuri had fully intended on following through with taking that nap, too. At least until he turned a corner on the second floor and almost ran into Chloe as she drug what looked to be a large painting wrapped in brown canvas and tied with twine through the hall.

“Gah!” Chloe jumped as her back ran into Yuri’s chest, him having jumped back as well and Chloe having to scramble to keep ahold of her large package. “Oh, I’m sorry, Yuri. I didn’t see you there.” “No, it’s my fault. I’m not the one dragging something heavy down the hall.” Yuri stepped forward and helped the princess stabilize where the massive package was wobbling dangerously close to smacking into the opposite wall. “Do you need help with this? It’s… Wow. It’s crazy heavy.”
“It sure is. Stupid proprietary politeness meaning I can’t have a room at the front of the guest floor just because the rest of you are men.” Chloe wiped the back of her hand across her forehead as she surveyed Yuri for a moment. “It’s not too much further to my room, but I guess I wouldn’t exactly mind the help. Thank you.”

“No problem.” Yuri smiled as he took up a spot at one end of the painting, picking it up as he followed Chloe’s lead as they went back down the direction Yuri had just come from. “You drug this all the way up here by yourself?”

“Yes, and I can confirm that pulling this thing up a flight of stairs was pretty close to what I would imagine to be the literal definition of hell.” Chloe grumbled as they maneuvered through a tight turn complete with inarticulate grunting and quiet curses. Once they were free of the corner, she went on. “I really should have gotten a maid or someone to help me, but Mother keeps getting on my case for buying stuff I don’t need…”

“Well, I definitely am not going to tell your mother that you’re buying paintings.” Yuri shifted his grip on what felt like a heavy wooden frame underneath the thick canvas protecting what was underneath. “This is a painting, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a bit bigger than I thought it would be, too.” Chloe let out a loud sigh of relief as they pulled even with a door halfway down the hall. “Finally. I was starting to worry I’d never make it.”

Yuri patiently supported the painting on his own as Chloe opened the door and swung it as wide as it could go. At her signal, he picked up his end again and they carefully eased it through the door and into what looked to be a comfortably furnished sitting room. Chloe jerked her head towards a nearby loveseat and they gently heaved the painting up onto the cushions.

“Perfect.” Chloe released her grip on the painting and dusted her hands off on her navy skirt. “Thank you again. I’ll have someone properly store it later. After Mother is distracted by something more important than my expense account.”

“Any time.” Yuri rolled his shoulders back until something popped back into place in his back. “My sister paints, so this isn’t the first time I’ve had to move a heavy painting around.”

“It’s funny that you mention that…” Chloe smiled brightly and pulled at some of the strings wrapped around the package and peeled back the brown canvas paper from the top righthand corner of the painting, letting Yuri get a glimpse at the colored canvas within.
He might not have been home for five years, but Mari’s distinctive geometrically designed painting style hadn’t changed much since she’d been fourteen and figured out she could put math in her artwork for the first time. Her technique might have become more refined over the intervening years, her brushstrokes firmer and her colors bolder, but the framework all that improvement sat on was the same and Yuri couldn’t quite hold back a gasp of surprise.

“You bought one of my sister’s paintings?” Yuri asked as he stepped forward and ran his fingertips over the polished wood frame. He knew enough from having been scolded by Mari in the past to keep his hands away from the paint itself.

“They’re stunning works, aren’t they? She showed me some pictures of a few of them when she was here before.” Chloe laced her fingers together and swung her joined hands back and forth as she watched him survey the little bit of it he could see. “When I saw she’d put this one up for auction I just had to grab it.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen this one before. It must be one of her new ones.” Yuri took a closer look at the bright red lines superimposed on a black and grey background. He wished he could see more than just the one corner, but this was the bit Chloe had uncovered for him and it wasn’t his purchase to unwrap. “On her behalf, thank you for your patronage.”

“No need for thanks. She really is an amazing artist.” Chloe’s tone was fond and something tugged at the corners of Yuri’s mind, forcing him to pay less attention to the art and more attention to the princess who now owned it. “She’s probably kill me if she knew I was the one that bought it, though… You won’t tell her, right?”

“I won’t, but she’ll find out on her own eventually. Mari always finds out when someone tries to pull something off behind her back. It’s like her own kind of inconvenient superpower. Trust me, I would know.” Yuri pulled his hand away and turned back to where Chloe was still watching him. “You might as well tell her and get it over with.”

“You’re probably right. I never have been good at keeping secrets anyway. I’ll tell her next time she calls…” Chloe trailed off there for a second with a wince. Then she sighed heavily and looked at Yuri with a resigned expression. “See? I wasn’t supposed to tell you that…”

“You’ve been calling my sister?” Yuri couldn’t help but ask, even though the answer was obvious.

Chloe shrugged. “We’re friends. I had a good time talking to her when she was here… I wanted to tell you, but she was worried you might be upset because she was able to call me and not you. Which I think is beyond ridiculous, by the way. They have the stupidest and strictest rules around
“Agreed. They are fond of the ‘keep all of us in a bubble’ approach.” Yuri had to laugh at that. By now, laughing was the only thing he could do in the face of the situation he found himself in. “I’m not upset, if it helps. I miss getting to talk to my family, but I’m not going to begrudge either you or her a friendship.”

“I didn’t think you would... I’m pretty sure she was trying to temper her own desire to talk to you more than anything else. She’s worried about you.” As she spoke, Chloe eased herself down into a nearby armchair and pulled her legs up underneath her skirts. “Aside from enjoying conversing with me, I can give her more information about you and how you’re doing than what you can put in your letters. My secure line is monitored by the Britannian government and no one else, so we don’t have to worry about any fallout for you for anything we discuss.”

“Thank you.” Yuri said in response, and he meant it. “Thank you for letting them know how I am. For keeping them from worrying too much.”

“Nah. That’s no problem at all.” Chloe waved off Yuri’s thanks and motioned for him to take the empty chair positioned across from her. “That’s the least I can do.”

Yuri took up the spot that had been offered to him. He’d spent plenty of time with Chloe around everyone else, but he couldn’t say he’d be able to spend really any time with her in a private setting or even alone and he was curious. Curious about her in general and about exactly how close she was with his sister. Not that he though even for a second that Mari couldn’t take care of herself. He, more than anyone, was intimately aware of just how good Mari was at handling her business, but there was still some sort of brotherly instinct pulling at him that he wanted to take a minute or two to indulge.

Well, that, and the princess might have more detailed information about his friends and family back home, and Yuri was painfully aware of how desperate he was for that information not that he had a glimmer of hope it might be available for him to have.

“How are they doing?” Yuri asked as he settled into his own cushy armchair. “The letters I get sound upbeat enough, but…”

“But you are all aware that those letters are not getting to you without an extra pair or two of eyes reading over them first.” Chloe finished his sentence for him, her usually bubbly tone sobering somewhat. “They’re doing really well. Mari doesn’t say it in so many words, but it’s easy to tell they’re all proud of you. And excited. The triplets may or may not have designed some proofs of
wedding invitations for you last week… Luckily your mom caught them before they could try to take them to a printer and distribute them anywhere…”

“That sounds like them.” Yuri stated blandly and they both laughed, Chloe very obviously relaxing some in response to Yuri’s positive reaction to her story. “If Mom hadn’t caught them, I’d bet we’d have half of Carolina on our doorstep ready to attend a wedding that isn’t even scheduled yet.”

“The way Mari tells it, that might be part of their plan.” Chloe giggled. “If the wedding guests show up unannounced you two might be forced to scramble to just go ahead and give everyone what they want.”

“Now I wish Mom hadn’t stopped them. The media advisors would love that.” It was like that comment had opened the floodgates and they both laughed so hard they ended up doubled over in their seats. Yuri gripped his armrests for support and Chloe wrapped her arms around her waist as she curled in on herself and they both tried to catch their breaths.

“They are a dour bunch, aren’t they?” Chloe said once she’d regained the ability to speak. “The tall one… Oh, what’s his name? The one with the mole under his left ear? Quinn! I’m pretty sure his name is Quinn. Anyway, he always does this thing when he thinks I’m being too candid about something where he’ll kind of half sigh and then uncross and re-cross his legs…”

“I know! It just makes him look like he has to use the restroom!” That set them both off into another fit of giggles. “I’ve honestly almost given up on getting them to like me. Nothing I do or don’t do seems to make a difference. Maybe if I pretended to be JJ I’d have a shot.”

“Oh, god. They’re like his biggest fans. It drives me nuts.” Chloe smiled and shook her head. “The last thing that boy needs are more people stroking that gigantic ego of his.”

“You know, I never thought there’s be a time when JJ would look uncomfortable being praised for simply existing, but when we were getting ready for The Report last week, Rodger, the bald one, cornered him and went into this long spiel about how he needed to make sure he places himself front and center in the group at all times and poor JJ looked like he wanted to run. Chris and Phichit saved him by pretending to trip over a chair and breaking it.”

“Yes, well, it does get awfully dull when people just mindlessly agree with you or push you to the front all the time for no real reason other than they think you should be important, and not because you actually are.” Chloe shrugged. “Poor guy.”
That was not exactly a common opinion he’d heard about JJ, but Yuri didn’t protest. It made sense, in a way, and, even though Yuri wasn’t close to the other man, he’d be stupid to think there wasn’t more to him than what he projected to the outside world.

After all, there wasn’t a single one of them that wasn’t guilty of putting on a certain persona in public. JJ was just more practiced at it than Yuri thought he ever would be and had chosen a much more annoying persona than most people would have.

Conversation turned out to be easy with Chloe from there. Much easier than Yuri had anticipated it to be.

It turned out they had a lot in common. Yuri vaguely remembered Chloe having mentioned previously that she enjoyed going to the ballet, but he hadn’t realized how deep that interest ran. It felt good to have somebody to talk to who understood the technical aspects of a performance as much as the artistic components.

Aside from ballet, they talked about their families and Chloe had a deep well of embarrassing stories about Victor that had Yuri on the edge of his seat and drinking in every tiny detail. Yuri repaid her generosity by regaling her with stories about Mari and her hunt for her perfect artistic calling broken instruments and small-scale fires from over baking pottery included.

Time flew and, before they knew it, the chiming of the dinner bell reminded them both they needed to get ready for the meal and they parted ways with the promise of setting up a time to talk again in the future.

Yuri returned to his room quite a bit lighter than the first time he’d left it that day.

Despite the chaos of the past few days, Yuri was feeling better than he had in a long time. He felt strong and sure and confident, the buzz in his mind faded and leaving nothing but his own cool, logical thoughts in its wake.

The last time he’d felt so settled had to have been before his injury when his world had come crashing down. He’d almost forgotten what it felt like to be comfortable in his own skin and he welcomed it with opened arms.

Finally, he felt like he belonged.
Yuri and Minako were both in his bathroom fixing his hair for dinner when they were interrupted by someone knocking on his bedroom door.

“Were you expecting someone?” Minako asked as she frowned down at where her fingers were sticky with gel.

“No, I don’t think so.” Yuri pushed away from the counter in front of him and grabbed his glasses, putting them back on his face. “I’ll get it. We’re almost done anyway.”

Minako grunted in agreement and was wiping her hands off on the hand towel she’d tucked into the waistband of her slacks as Yuri left the bathroom and headed to get the door. Whoever was on the other side knocked again, a little harder than before.

“Hang on!” Yuri called out as he picked up his pace and hurried across his room. He opened the door and had to move quickly out of the way as the person on the other side stepped into the room, a familiar head of silver hair catching the light as he stepped out of the darker hallway and into the brighter lights of Yuri’s room. “Victor? What are you…?”

“Yuri!” Victor sounded relived and Yuri allowed the prince to pull him into a tight hug. “I’ve been looking for you all day! Where have you been?”

“Um… A bunch of places, I guess.” Yuri pulled back enough so that he could see Victor’s face. “I was in the dance studio for a bit and then I ran into Chloe and we started talking and lost track of time… Um, and now I’m here? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine now.” Victor looked like he was going to say something else, but he paused and looked back over Yuri’s shoulder instead. “Ah, Minako. Good evening.”

“Good evening, Your Highness.” Minako responded congenially. “You’re cutting it awfully close to dinnertime.”

“I know.” Victor didn’t seem phased by that announcement at all and his grip around Yuri’s waist only tightened. “Do you mind if I have a moment alone with Yuri?”
Minako’s eyes narrowed and her frown deepened. “Sometime I really think you try to come up with new ways to get into trouble… But, fine. You can have a moment. A short moment, and I’m going to be standing right outside the door the entire time. You are not going to be more than five minutes late to dinner. I refuse to have to listen to your father go off on another rant about responsibility and making smarter choices and I would you’d want to avoid that, too.”

“We won’t be long.” Victor grinned as Minako made her way past them. “I promise.”

“I want you to remember that this door isn’t locked, and if you try to lock it I’ll have it open so fast both your heads will spin.” Minako warned and then she was gone, the door closing with a loud click behind her.

“Victor are you okay?” As soon as Minako had left the room, Yuri turned his full attention to where Victor was trying to pull him in close again. Instead of going along with it this time, Yuri planted his hands on Victor’s shoulders and held him back from coming any closer than he already was.

“Who me?” Victor asked, though he did stop trying to pull Yuri flush against him and allowed him to maintain their current distance. “I’m fine. I was just worried about you.”

“About me? Why?” Yuri was confused. He tried to go over everything that had happened that day in an effort to figure out why Victor might have gotten the idea that Yuri might not have been alright, but he couldn’t even recall seeing the prince in passing, much less doing or saying something that might have led someone to think there could be a problem. The only thing he was coming up with was the conversation he’d had with Chris before lunch, but he’d thought they’d left each other in a good place. Maybe Chris hadn’t thought so and had gone to Victor with some concerns? “Why would you think that? Did Chris say something?”

“Chris? What? No, Chris didn’t say anything.” Now Victor was the one that looked confused. “Wait. Should Chris have said something?”

“No… I don’t think so?” Yuri took a deep breath as he tried to clear some of his muddled confusion out of his mind. “Victor, why did you think I wasn’t okay?”

“I… I… Um…” Victor’s cheeks reddened some as he flushed and stammered under Yuri’s suddenly intense scrutiny. “I don’t know. We didn’t really get a chance to talk last night and then you weren’t at breakfast… Which I honestly thought you were tired and just sleeping in, but then you weren’t and lunch and I looked for you after that… But you weren’t here and you weren’t anywhere else I
looked and Minako hadn’t seen you since you didn’t get out of bed this morning... And I.... I was worried.”

“Oh… I didn’t think about that. I should have sent you a note or something.” It would have been easy to get angry or annoyed with Victor. Part of Yuri really wanted to do that, having caught onto what Victor had been dancing around. That Yuri going missing from Victor’s point of view meant the prince had instantly leapt to the worst conclusion. The worst conclusion being that Yuri had been curled up into a useless ball somewhere because he couldn’t handle himself. “I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

He must not have been able to hide his kneejerk reaction as well as he thought he had because Victor’s face fell. "No, no… You’re fine. I, um, I was tired and paranoid…”

“And you were still one hundred percent right. If I was having a true issue I would have hid from you.” It hurt Yuri to admit, but it was the truth. And, while Victor’s jumping to that conclusion hadn’t been his best moment, Yuri had totally forgotten what state Victor had found him in the last time he’d disappeared without warning. “I’m fine, though. I really am. You were right. I was tired this morning and I begged Minako to let me sleep in. That’s all I did, too. Sleep. Chris woke me up in time for lunch and I ran into Phichit on the way there and he wanted to have lunch with me in private because he wanted to gossip, so we ate in the dance studio. I didn’t even think about poking my head into see you, but I should have.”

“Maybe, but I should have trusted you more…”

“Victor.” Yuri cut Victor off by placing an index finger on the prince’s lips. “This time it’s really not about whether you trust me or not. After last time you had every right to be worried. Some of this is on me for not thinking.”

“It’s on both of us.” Victor stated firmly. “We’ll have to figure something out on both our ends to make sure it doesn’t happen again. I don’t want to bother you if you’re fine and just need some space. I don’t have to know where you are at all times.”

“Well, to be fair, usually Minako would have known where I was, but when I ran into Chloe I helped her carry something back to her room and we ended up talking until the dinner bell. I didn’t even think to tell her where I was and I probably should have done that, too. I’ve been here long enough to know that it’s important someone knows where I am in case there’s an emergency or plans change and we’re needed somewhere.”

“Technically, that’s right, but I can’t say I haven’t spent a fair amount of my own time hiding from
“attendants and my father, so you’re forgiven there.” The edges of Victor’s lips quirked upward and
Yuri allowed his own to do the same, the atmosphere in the room lightening significantly in that
moment. “Sometimes I wonder if Minako doesn’t secretly like whipping everyone up into a panic if I
disappear for ten minutes. I wouldn’t want to take that away from her.”

“Speaking of… She’s going to come back in here any minute to make sure we go to dinner.” Yuri
did not want to think about Minako waiting for them in that moment, but not thinking about it didn’t
mean it wasn’t going to happen. There weren’t exactly a lot of places they could hide in Yuri’s room
to avoid it either. Not unless they wanted to risk going out the window and probably breaking an
ankle in the process. “Do you think you’ll be free this evening?”

Victor again tugged at Yuri’s waist to get him to move closer and this time Yuri went where he was
pulled, resting his head against Victor’s shoulders and wrapping his arms around the prince’s neck.

“I’m free. Father and Lilia are going to spend the evening in town so everything we had planned has
been postponed… Though I guess we shouldn’t spend the whole time together…” Victor sighed and
buried his nose in Yuri’s hair. “As much as I want to, there have been some people here who feel as
though I spend far too much time with you already. I’ve assured them that was utterly impossible,
since there is no such thing as spending ‘too much’ time with you, but I was overruled.”

“You? Overruled? I don’t believe it.” Yuri smiled even though he knew Victor couldn’t see it from
his angle and relaxed even further against his warm chest. “Since when have you ever let anyone tell
you what to do?”

“You know what? You’re right. I should go tell them to stuff it. I can spend time with whoever I
want.” Victor’s deep chuckle rumbled through his chest and Yuri tilted his head up so he could see
where Victor was looking down at him fondly. “How about a compromise? I can come down to the
Entertaining Room with you after dinner and we can all spend some time together. And then we can
go for a walk in the garden later in the evening. I get to spend the whole time with you and no one
can complain about it at all.”

“It sounds perfect.” And Yuri showed exactly how perfect he thought it was by rocking up onto his
toes in order to give Victor a quick peck on the lips. “We should go to dinner now.”

“Nope. Don’t want to.” Victor smiled softly and bent his head in order to give Yuri a deeper and
longer kiss.

Yuri had to admit that he completely agreed with that sentiment as he ran his fingers through the
short hair at the nape of Victor’s neck and sighed happily as Victor ran his hands down from Yuri’s
waist to rest in the dip of his back right above his waistband. He found he was particularly hard
pressed to find the will to be responsible when Victor would kiss him like that. As though Yuri was
the most precious thing to him in all the world.

“Yuri! Prince Victor!” Minako’s loud shout and subsequent pounding on the door pulled them apart,
though they barely moved more than a few centimeters away from each other. “Don’t make me
come in there and drag you out by your ears. You know I’ll do it!”

“She will, and she’ll enjoy it, too.” Yuri muttered darkly even as Victor sent a particularly potent
pout towards the door. “Come on. We should go.”

Victor whined and drug his heels, but he followed when Yuri made to move towards leaving the
room.

And if Minako looked more than a little bit smug as she greeted them and pushed them down the
hall, well, Yuri was feeling a bit on the smug side himself.

He was done apologizing for taking Victor’s time and attention. Done feeling guilty about trying to
take what he wanted for once.

Yuri was here to stay, and it was time everyone else knew it, too.
Transitions

Chapter Notes

Whelp... I really wanted to post this on or around Halloween, but that clearly didn't happen so...

In other news, updates might be a little sketchy this month since I typically always participate in NaNoWriMo and, since this piece is relatively close to done, I decided to use Victor's companion piece to this story as my project... Which, considering this chapter alone was a little under 13.5K words, means that I'll have a good two and a half chapters done once I hit that target 50,000 words with it. At least that means there won't be a long gap between the ending of this and getting the first few chapters of that up? Hahaha.

As always, massive thanks and gratitude to all of you who have been so patiently and diligently keeping up with me. It wouldn't be nearly as much fun without you guys!

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Chapter 27 - Transitions

Things had changed, or maybe it was only Yuri who had changed.

It wasn’t some kind of magical transformation. It wasn’t at all like Yuri had woken up one morning as a completely different person. The changes had been gradual over time and there were still parts of him that carried some amount of doubt and anxiety, that was something he knew would never go away, but those parts were smaller than they had been before and were easier to ignore during the day.

He had shown up at the palace lost and broken and unsure if he was ever going to find his footing again in a world he was convinced he was never going to fit into.

Now… Now he was stronger. Now he was sure. Yuri knew what he wanted and what he had to do to get it. Now he had a firm goal, a new reason to drag himself out of bed in the mornings. He might never perfectly fit into the hole that had been opened for someone here, but he’d never let not being a perfect fit stop him before. He could learn, he could be flexible, and he could handle the things he wouldn’t be able to change. He’d done it before and he could do it again.

Especially because this time he didn’t have to do it alone.
All his life Yuri had closed himself off and fought his battles on his own. Objectively, he now knew he’d been stubborn and stupid, ignoring the outstretched hands of his friends and family offering to catch him if he needed to fall. He’d thought he wouldn’t deserve anything he’d earned unless he earned it on his own. It had been flawed thinking, but Yuri hadn’t known that then. Hadn’t noticed it until it had been far too late.

Yuri didn’t want to do that anymore. He didn’t want to walk past open arms and helping hands in order to go it on his own out of a misplaced sense of pride. He’d spent his entire career in a perpetual duet, lifting his dance partners up and supporting them through a full pas de deux, but never letting them turn around and support him in turn. Yuri didn’t want that any longer. He wanted a true partnership, one where he could trust that he would be lifted up just as high.

He wanted everything. All that Victor was offering him that and more, and Yuri wanted to give everything he had to Victor in return.

Yuri had danced duets his entire life, never trusting himself to truly stand on his own even as he refused to let anyone else in. He’d spent all his time proving to himself that he could be valuable by being whatever anyone needed him to be. So much time, in fact, that he’d completely forgotten there was an actual person underneath the costumes and bright lights.

Well, he may have danced duets his entire life, but now was the first time he wanted to dance one the way it was meant to be danced. Time to drop playing roles and be himself, someone who could support his partner and allow them to support him in return.

He was ready. As ready as he’d ever been or would be. He didn’t have all the details worked out. He didn’t know the perfect thing to say or do and he didn't have the choreography down pat, but he was done waiting in the wings for his cue to step on stage.

It was his turn now and Yuri wasn’t going to wait around hoping for some kind of sign that he’d chosen the right path. Just like he’d done over five years ago, it was time for him to make a choice and jump. Only, this time, he knew there was someone waiting to catch him on the other side.

Yuri was committed now, and it was time to show that commitment to the world.

~

About a week after Victor had taken Yuri on their midnight outing, Emil went home. It had been a
predictably somber affair. Emil had always been good for a smile or bright words of encouragement and his presence would be missed.  

As much as he hated to see Emil go, there was a part of him that was almost excited about yet another elimination. It was just another step towards the end and, for the first time, Yuri was actually completely happy about taking that step.  

That wasn’t to say he wasn’t nervous at all, because he was and he knew himself well enough by now to know that part of him was always going to be nervous when he could sense something big was brewing on the horizon, but it wasn’t the all-encompassing block of fear and panic as it had been in the past. It was almost comically easy to ignore considering how much trouble that bit of his brain had given him in that regard for most of his life.  

He was sure the others had noticed his more relaxed mood, but only Phichit and Chris ever really mentioned it to him.  

Which was another thing that had changed. Before, he’d spent most of his spare time with Phichit, Guang Hong, and Leo when he felt like socializing. Now he spent about as much, if not more, time with Phichit, but it was Chris and Chris alone who would often come to join them instead of their normal friend group.  

That’s exactly who he found himself with one evening two days after Emil had said his goodbyes and packed his bags to go home. It had been a particularly long and busy day as they had been preparing for a truly live roundtable discussion on The Report the next week and Yuri had found his friends relaxing in the library once the final meeting for the day had wrapped up.  

“Ugh. My brain is totally fried. I don’t think they would have even given us a break for lunch if Mila hadn’t eventually protested and threatened a walk-out.” Phichit was slumped down in a comfortable armchair. As he spoke, he kicked off his shoes and pulled his legs up underneath himself and rolled up into as much of a ball as he could. “When those media advisors get going on a topic, they can really go.”  

“You do know it would help if you and Chris didn’t constantly throw them off track by asking the most asinine questions, right?” Yuri grumbled in response. He’d taken a chair at a nearby table for his own when he’d come in, operating under the futile hope of being able to scavenge some amount of concentration to go over a report Celestino had given him on the national budget in preparation for a meeting they were supposed to attend with the ministers of finance on Monday. It was a losing battle, but at least it made him feel like he’d tried. “And, before you say anything else, yes, asking if they would flash a red light at you if you give a response in the wrong way is a stupid question.”
“Well, I thought it was a brilliant question and a very valiantly made point!” Chris exclaimed from his own armchair with more enthusiasm than Yuri would ever be able to muster. He also completely ignored Yuri’s muttered ‘you would’ as he went on. “They’ve got a long enough list of responses we should avoid that you’d think someone could come up with some kind of system to warn us when we’re about to step in it.”

“Knowing the two of you, you’d just use that system to your advantage to make sure you step in it on purpose.” Yuri shoved the papers he’d been pretending to study across the table and as far away from him as he could get them with the minimum amount of effort. “You do know that most people wouldn’t see being threatened to be drug out of a room by your ear if you won’t take things seriously as a badge of honor.”

“Yes, well, I’ve never claimed to be like most people, now have I?” Chris teased back, wagging his eyebrows at Yuri in an exaggerated way that caused Phichit to burst out into hysterical giggling from his corner. “It was funny when Phichit said it, though. If Graham had been wearing pearls, he would have been clutching them for dear life.”

“Well, someone had to do something before we all died of boredom in there. I was simply performing an exceptionally necessary service for the good of all.” Phichit’s giggles subsided some as he shrugged. “Someone really needs to take those guys aside and remind them what it’s like to have a little fun.”

“Oh! When you do, can you make sure to invite me along?” All three heads swiveled at the sound of Victor’s voice jumping into the conversation and they all tracked the prince’s progress as he moved through the room and gracefully sank down into the open chair at Yuri’s side. “I think I’ve earned the right to be there for having dealt with them the longest out of all of you.”

“How about this? Phichit and I will set up a date and time and we’ll send you a formal invitation.” Chris smirked as Victor laughed. “What about you, Yuri? Would you prefer us to send you an invitation as well, or would you prefer to be included in our plans to teach those old windbags how to loosen up a little?”

“Can I pick neither?” Yuri asked as he tamped down the urge to elbow Victor in the side as the other man snickered next to him. “I know I’m never going to make them like me, but I’d at least like to preserve our current relationship where they actually tolerate me.”

“Aw… That’s no fun.” Phichit pouted, but seemed to think better about continuing to tease him when he saw the pointed glare Yuri was giving him. Instead he quickly turned to Victor and changed the subject. “And what are you up to, Your Highness? They let you have a rare evening off?”
“Yeah. It seems that my father and stepmother are cooking up something on their own and don’t need or want my input, so I’m free until tomorrow morning.” Victor didn’t seem upset at being left out at all. In fact, he was as relaxed and happy as Yuri had ever seen him. “I’m sure I’ll regret not poking around more when I’m inevitably roped into some kind of speech or event I have no desire to be a part of, but I’m going to enjoy the freedom now while I have it. “So, what are you lovely gentlemen up to this evening?”

“It won’t be that much longer until dinner.” Yuri pointed out a bit distractedly as he was trying to bat away Victor’s hands from where they had been reaching for his papers. “We haven’t exactly made any plans beyond that.”

“We could make plans, though.” Phichit had perked up some with Victor’s arrival and Yuri couldn’t help but notice his friend staring openly at where Yuri was still trying to keep Victor’s hands off his paperwork. “Did you want to make plans?”

“Victor, they’re just budget reports. Leave them alone.” Yuri moved his small stack over to his other side so that Victor would have to lean around him and across half the table to get to them. “Or, I mean, you can have them if you really want… I did have some questions about the expenses on page three…”

At that Victor winced and decided to grab Yuri’s hand instead. “Never mind. I thought they might be something interesting like letters. You can keep those.”

“Gee. Thanks.” Yuri tried to put as much sarcasm as he could into that statement, but he knew the soft smile he could feel stretched across his lips had probably undercut most of it. “You do know that Phichit’s still waiting for you to answer his question, right?”

“Hmmm?” Victor looked over Yuri’s shoulder to where both Chris and Phichit were watching them while barely suppressing amused giggles. “Sorry, Phichit. What did you ask?”

“I asked if you wanted to make plans with us for after dinner, but I think you’ve already given me your answer.” Phichit winked at them and Yuri rolled his eyes even as he could see Victor’s grin widen. “I guess we’re just going to have to find a way to keep ourselves entertained on our own, Chris.”

“Looks like it.” Chris threw his head back and laughed as Yuri sent him an irritable glare, even as he knew without having to look that Victor was beaming smugly at his side. “Alas, at least we can tell when we’re not wanted, my friend.”
“Actually…” Victor still sounded smug, but there was also a hint of something almost like excitement in his tone. Like he’d just gotten some kind of idea and Yuri braced himself for whatever the prince was about to say next. He’d figured out the hard way that the odds were about fifty/fifty with how much trouble could be caused by Victor’s spontaneous ideas. “I can’t remember if the four of us have ever had the chance to hang out together. What do you guys think about going down to the theater and having our dinner served there while we watch some movies? I can even tell the staff it’s a date night so we can make sure everyone will leave us alone.”

“Oh! That sounds like a great idea!” Chris also sounded excited as he hopped up out of his seat. “I’m always down for a good movie night marathon.”

“Same.” Phichit had jumped to his feet as well and immediately shoved his shoes back on. “Ah! Why don’t we change into pajamas and bring down blankets and pillows and stuff and we can make a real sleepover out of it!”

“That sounds like an excellent idea!” Victor also bounced to his feet, pulling Yuri along by their joined hands as he did so. “What do you think, Yuri?”

“Sounds like it could be fun.” And it did sound like fun. Yuri couldn’t exactly say he’d attended any sleepovers before, and he knew a bunch of twenty-somethings might be a bit old for it, but he couldn’t help but be a little excited at the thought of spending an evening relaxing with Victor and their friends. “Do you really think they’ll let us do it on such short notice?”

“There are some things I have the power to make happen.” Victor stated with another wide grin. “This just so happens to be one of them. You guys go ahead and get changed and I’ll meet you down there once I’ve notified all of the appropriate parties of our plans.”

There was a flurry of movement as they all made to grab anything they’d brought with them and leave. Yuri almost dropped Victor’s hand to do the same when he got an idea.

“Hey, Victor?” Yuri tightened his grip on the prince’s hand and Victor instantly turned to him with an expectant look on his face. “Is Makkachin allowed down there?”

“I don’t see why not. He’s allowed most everywhere else.” Victor looked suddenly more eager. “I’ll bring him, too! That would definitely make everything totally perfect.”
With that settled they did go their separate ways, though Victor hadn’t been able to restrain himself from giving Yuri a brief hug when he left them by the stairway. Not that Yuri was going to complain about that at all, even with Chris and Phichit snickering like kindergarteners behind them. It wasn’t like they didn’t know already exactly how close Victor and Yuri were, and, even if they hadn’t, Yuri had wanted that hug and he would have been hard pressed to care what anyone else thought in that moment.

Yuri left Chris and Phichit behind in the hall, as their rooms were closer to the main stairway than his own, and he made his way to his room quickly.

As it was getting close to when the dinner bell would ring its first warning, Minako was already there when he arrived. She looked up from where she was smoothing out a freshly starched, white collared shirt on his bed when he stepped into the room.

“Well, someone’s early.” Minako straightened up and sent Yuri an amused glance. “And surprisingly eager from the way you burst through that door.”

“I didn’t burst through…” Yuri sighed and changed tracks before he could get further distracted. Logically he knew it was going to take some time for Victor to find whoever he needed to find and collect his own things, but Yuri was just excited enough to still be in a hurry. “Never mind. Anyway, I’m not going to dinner tonight. Victor invited Chris, Phichit, and I to have dinner and watch some movies in the theater instead. He wants it to be a sleepover type thing so I’ll need my blankets and sweats and not my coat and tie.”

“That sounds like a lovely evening well spent.” Minako grabbed the shirt from off the bed and danced back to the closet to hang it up. “At least you’ll have chaperones, although I’m not sure how much I trust those other boys.”

“Fair enough. They’re definitely instigators.” Yuri wasn’t going to argue that point. Anyone who’d spent more than five minutes with the pair of them would have known that. “Victor’s going to bring Makkachin, too. I’m sure Makka will keep an eye on us all.”

“You should have said that in the first place. In that case, you have my full blessing to go and enjoy your sleepover. It’s a comfort to know you’ve invited along at least one responsible party.” Minako smiled at him warmly as she grabbed his pillows from the head of the bed and began to roll up his comforter. “Do you actually think you’ll spend the night down there?”

“I’m not sure. I got the feeling we were going to play it by ear and see what we feel like.” Yuri moved around Minako and made his way to the dresser and sorted through the drawer that held his
more comfortable clothing.

He’d been able to add a few things to the drawer over the past few months. Victor was surprisingly eager when it came to making sure Yuri had a complete assortment of workout clothes and dance shoes, but Yuri pushed most of that aside in favor of a warn pair of black sweatpants and a deep blue t-shirt that had the faded logo got the National Ballet stamped on it in silver.

“I’ll go ahead and check here for you in the morning and then I can check downstairs if you’re not here.” Minako bundled up his two pillows inside his comforter and grabbed the soft fleece throw he’d left hung over his desk chair in order to fold it and place it on top of the stack. “Is there anything else you think you’ll need?”

“Nothing I can think of right now.” Yuri paused in the doorway to his bathroom. “If I’ve forgotten something, I can always come back and get it later.”

Minako mumbled something that sounded like an affirmative and Yuri went ahead and closed the bathroom door in order to get changed in privacy.

He changed his clothes, washed his face, brushed his teeth, and did everything else he usually did to get ready for bed minus his stretches. It felt a little weird to be getting into his sleep clothes instead of slacks and a nice shirt with the dinner bell ringing its warning in the background, but Yuri was able to quell that feeling of unease from not following his usual routine easily enough.

“You’re not going to need me for the rest of the night, are you?” Minako asked as soon as Yuri re-emerged from the bathroom.

“I don’t see why I would. If I need anything I can get it on my own or find a night maid or something if I really need help getting it.” Yuri pulled the neatly rolled and folded bedding towards the edge of the bed and closer to himself. “I can carry this stuff down on my own, too, if you want to go ahead and make an early night of it.”

“I think I will go ahead and do that. If you really need me, I’ll keep my pager close.” Minako gave him a quick pat on the shoulder as she breezed past him. “Barring that, I hope you have a nice evening.”

Yuri sent her off with a smile and a wave, thanking her as she left the door open in her wake so he wouldn’t have to fumble with the handle with his hands full.
His armload of bedding secure, Yuri hurried to make his way to where he needed to go, humming a tune under his breath as he went.

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Victor, predictably, wasn’t there by the time Yuri had found his way to the right room in the basement. He’d never had cause to go down there even though Phichit had invited him a few times to watch movies along with some of the others. It was simple enough to find his way as there were only a handful of rooms aside from the long hallway he knew led to a vast storage space. The first door he’d opened had turned out to be some kind of gym with weights and other workout equipment, which would have been a nice thing to know about months ago, although he was now pretty sure he knew exactly where Victor’s impressive biceps had come from.

The second door turned out to be the room he wanted. It was quite a bit smaller than the theaters he’d been in when he’d been a kid, but there was still a very large screen against the far wall and the seats looked even more comfortable.

Though most of the seats were in the process of being pulled to the side by a set of attendants in favor of some cushy looking pallets that had been laid out on the floor. As Yuri stepped through the doorway he had to quickly move out of the way of a young girl in a maid’s uniform that was carrying a stack of cushions.

“It looks downright cozy in here.” Chris stepped into the room behind the maid, with one of his own attendants at his back carrying what looked to be Chris’ blankets and pillows. “Leave it to Victor to never do a thing half-assed.”

“No, he certainly does not.” Yuri stated simply in response and Yuri claimed one of the pallets towards the back of the room, though, now that he was able to get a better look, ‘pallets’ seemed to be a bit of an understatement as they were basically small mattresses. He dumped his things on top of it and turned to find Chris pointing out the place he wanted out to his attendant so the man could do the same.

“Thank you, Errol. That will be all for tonight. I’ll ring for you from my room in the morning when I’m ready for you.” Chris clapped his attendant on the shoulder and they exchanged goodnights before he turned to give his full attention back to Yuri. “I still can’t believe we all have the night off to even do this. I almost miss those first few months where no one wanted us anywhere and we could do pretty much whatever so long as we stayed out of the way.”
“While I do miss the free time, I can’t say I miss having to bump elbows with so many people when we did have lessons. You’d think they’d have some bigger conference rooms around here.” Yuri was sure the conference rooms they’d been using for their etiquette lessons before Victor had narrowed them down were plenty big under normal circumstances and without thirty people shoved into them, but he did have to admit it made the room feel even smaller when most of those men had openly shunned Yuri for reasons that were now painfully obvious with the benefit of hindsight. It didn’t help that Yuri had never been fond of being crammed together with strangers even when they weren’t harboring hostile feelings towards him.

“I don’t think they typically need that much space around here. Normally the king will hold his more important meetings at Parliament instead of here.” Chris explained as he began to arrange his bedding. “I’ll be willing to bet they’ve put all that on hold until this Selection business wraps up. It must be easier to bring everything here instead of ferrying all of us over there all the time. That and it’s pretty obvious Victor would be too distracted with everyone else here and him having to be there when we’d need to be left behind.”

“I never thought about that. Do they really always go to Parliament usually?” So far, Yuri knew of only one time when Victor had gone while they’d been there. When the Britannians had all been there and the Elite had been left behind. Offhand, Yuri could recall maybe five or six times the king had gone on his own, too.

Yuri, himself, had never been to the part of the city that housed the state buildings as he’d never had a need to, but he did remember a dancer or two over the years being late to a lesson or a rehearsal because they’d had to go down that way for one thing or another and they’d said they’d gotten caught up in security blockades because the king was holding sessions. Half the time, he’d honestly assumed they were making up a likely excuse in an effort not to get in trouble for being late. He hadn’t thought there was enough reason for any of the royals to be there nearly that often.

“At least three times a week. There are more suitable workspaces there and it’s considerably easier than having all of Parliament come here whenever the king needs or wants to sit in on a session. The one thing I will say about King Yakov is that he’s very interested and involved in the day to day operations of the country and the districts.” For a moment, it seemed like Chris had been about to say more, but he zoned in on something over Yuri’s left shoulder and Yuri could see his attitude instantly shift. “Phichit! What took you so long?”

“One of my hamsters got out. It took us about ten minutes to catch the little bugger. Luckily it was the slowest and laziest one or I might still be up there chasing him down.” Phichit was carrying his own pillow, his dark hair sticking up and staticky in places where it normally laid flat. He shuffled across the room, his attendant following in his wake with an armload of blankets until he flopped down onto the pallet closest to the one Chris had claimed. “Ah, sweet, soft relief.”

Yuri and Chris both laughed as Phichit’s attendant, a heavyset blonde woman who Yuri knew
firsthand to have the patience of a saint when it came to keeping up with Phichit and his antics dumped her armload of bedding directly onto his head.

Phichit let out a muffled shout and sputtered and flailed around for a moment before he was able to get his head free. “Thanks, Lacey. And thank you for helping me catch Arthur.”

“No problem. Are you going to need me to stop by your room in the morning to feed them?” She sounded chipper enough, but there was a hint of tension in her tone that led Yuri to the idea that she wasn’t exactly looking forward to that particular chore.

“No, I’ll set an alarm and make sure I get up with enough time to do it myself.” Phichit waved cheerfully as his attendant took her leave along with the others who had been setting up the room as they had finished rearranging the furniture while everyone else had been talking and settling in. “Phew. Okay. Now all we’re waiting on is Victor?”

“And the food.” As much as Yuri was anticipating Victor’s arrival, he was also acutely aware of the fact that their lunch had been light and abbreviated by the media advisor’s eagerness to squeeze in as long of a lecture as they could manage. “Food would be nice. I mean, you know, Victor’s cool, too, I guess.”

“It’s nice to know I rank as only marginally more important than dinner.” Yuri turned to the doorway at the sound of Victor’s voice and watched as the prince, complete with poodle nipping at his heels, immediately made a beeline to the only open pallet left. The one right next to Yuri’s.

“Did you happen to bring dinner with you? Because if you did then you might be able to gain a few extra points.” Yuri tried to keep his face as blank as possible, but he knew he’d failed by the way Victor’s eyes were sparkling even as he opened his mouth and placed a hand over his heart as though he was shocked and offended.

It didn’t help that Makkachin had instantly planted himself in Yuri’s lap and it was impossible to keep any kind of a stern face when he had an armload of fuzzy poodle to contend with.

“As mean to me as ever, Yuri.” Victor winked and Yuri’s façade of fake seriousness instantly melted at the gesture. “Don’t worry. Some of the kitchen staff will be bringing our meals down shortly.”

“That’s a relief.” Chris cut in, presumably because Phichit was too busy snickering into his pillow to say anything. “I’m hungry enough to eat my blanket.”
“If you guys keep talking like this, people are going to start thinking we don’t feed you.” Victor joked right back. “Then we’ll have to fend off everyone who’ll come running to the gates to rescue you and that just sounds like a lot of time and effort which could be better spent elsewhere.”

“Do we have to go with them when they come? I’m really starting to enjoy being held captive in the lap of luxury. Granted, it was an adjustment at first, but I’ve found a way to come to terms with it.” Phichit nimbly dodged the cushion Victor chucked at his face, all of them breaking out into laughter when it hit Chris instead.

“Excellent aim, Your Highness.” Chris stated sarcastically as he threw the cushion right back.

Chris’ throw hit its mark, but there had been enough force behind it for the cushion to bounce off Victor and hit Yuri in the shoulder and bounce down on top of Makkachin’s head.

“Chris!” Victor held a hand over his mouth like he was surprised and affronted at the same time. “I can’t believe you would drag poor, innocent Yuri and Makka into this!”

“You’re the one dragging us into it.” Yuri shot back as he swung the cushion around to hit Victor on the shoulder again. He also wisely kept his grip on it and pulled it back immediately so Victor couldn’t have a chance to grab it away from him and potentially continue the cycle.

Unfortunately, Yuri miscalculated some and neglected to anticipate the possibility of either Chris or Phichit re-arming the prince. Something Phichit did the second he noticed what Yuri had done.

“Phichit! I thought you were my friend.” Yuri resolutely told himself he wasn’t exactly whining, but he also knew he was lying to himself. Of course, he figured it was justified as the first thing Victor did with his new makeshift weapon was to try and hit Yuri with it.

Victor’s swing had gone a bit wide and Yuri dodged it without too much effort. “You do know the person you should be going after is Chris, right? He threw something at you first.”

“Valid point.” Victor didn’t even pause as he lobbed his acquired cushion in Chris’ general direction, catching Phichit on the back as Chris had moved while Phichit had merely turned in his spot in order to grab the pillow that had been sitting behind him. “Oops… Well, Phichit was the one I was trying to hit in the first place, so…”
Yuri saw what was starting to brew even before Phichit twisted back around and launched his pillow towards Victor without looking to see where it landed as he scrambled back towards Chris. He quickly pulled his glasses off and set them safely to the side.

His fast thinking saved him from having them broken or, at the very least, horribly bent because two seconds later he was hit square in the face by a cushion. He wasn’t entirely sure who’s been the one to throw it, but Phichit was the closest to him and he was fairly certain it hadn’t been Victor since the prince was rushing forward to bat at Chris as he dove to the side and towards where someone’s pillow had ended up on the floor right by him.

It was all out war then.

At first, they had split into something like teams, with Victor and Yuri on one side of the room and Phichit and Chris on the other. Makkachin was more than happy enough to dance back and forth between both sides, barking and acting like a wonderful trip hazard. However, at some point, most of the cushions and pillows ended up scattered throughout the no man’s land between the two factions and, in the process of trying to retrieve them, those brave enough to go out there fell victim to friendly fire.

“Chris!” Phichit squealed as he was hit on the back of the head by a pillow thrown by his former ally. “I should have known you would betray me!”

“It was an accident! I swear!” Although, if he had meant it he wouldn’t have kicked a cushion at Phichit’s knees, in Yuri’s opinion.

From that point, it was a free for all.

It was fun, though. Aside from Yuko and Takeshi, Yuri had never had many true friends. Definitely not any who he felt comfortable letting himself go and truly enjoying the moment with. No one who made him laugh so hard it was difficult to catch his breath. Everyone at the ballet was friendly enough, but they were all fighting for the same thing. Good roles, the spotlight, a chance to make it through another year…

If he’d gotten into a pillow fight with a group of them, there was a very high chance someone wouldn’t be as careful with his knee as they should have been. He wouldn’t have noticed them check a swing out of the corner of his eye like Victor had when he realized at the last second it was going to land lower than he was originally aiming, or how Phichit let him use him as a shield when
Chris and Victor suddenly ganged up on him after he’d been able to land solid blows on each of them in quick succession.

They were so caught up in their impromptu war that they didn’t notice three of the kitchen workers enter the room carrying trays and pushing a wheeled table in front of them.

Well, they didn’t notice them until a well-timed push from Phichit, who had decided he was done being a human shield, almost sent Yuri careening into them. He would have hit them, too, if Victor hadn’t grabbed him as soon as he’d stumbled and pulled him up short.

“Oh! Sorry. Sorry.” Yuri allowed Victor to stop him from stumbling back any further. For his part, the servant merely gave them all a slight grin and deftly moved the covered tray he was carrying from his right hand to his left. “I’m really sorry.”

“Not a problem at all, sir. No harm done.” The older man gave Yuri a soft look and nodded in the direction of Victor. “Your Highness.”

“Thank you, and thank you for putting it all together on such short notice.” Victor’s voice came from somewhere behind Yuri’s left ear, and he didn’t even need to turn around to know that he wasgiving the servants his most polite grin. “Did you manage to get some pizza?”

“Of course, Your Highness. Several varieties as requested.” Victor must have nodded or something in response because the man inclined his head once more in their general direction and went to assist the other two with setting up the table and laying out the dishes.

“How about we call a truce in favor of dinner?” Victor was still speaking from over Yuri’s left shoulder. When the prince had stopped Yuri’s forward momentum, he’d been pulled back against Victor’s chest with his arms wrapped firmly around Yuri’s middle and it didn’t look like Victor was ready or willing to let him go in a hurry.

Not that Yuri was in any rush to step away from the prince’s embrace either. It hadn’t been that long ago, maybe two weeks if he cared to count it, when he would have disentangled himself from Victor’s arms as soon as he’d regained his balance, too unsettled with even his friends in the Elite being around to witness their closeness to linger like he desperately wanted to.

Now, he found he didn’t care who saw or what they thought. Granted, neither Phichit nor Chris would care at all about public displays of affection between Victor and Yuri, and Yuri knew
personally they were actually more likely happy for them more than anything else. That didn’t matter too much to him, though. For all he cared even JJ, Guang Hong, or Leo could have been there as well and he still wouldn’t have been able to bring himself to move a muscle.

While he had been contemplating his newest revelation, Chris and Phichit had apparently agreed to Victor’s proposed truce and were hovering over where the staff were still setting up the wheeled table with trays of food and bottled drinks. They were busying chattering to each other and asking questions of the staff and dodging Makkachin’s curious sniffing and no one seemed to be paying Victor and Yuri any real attention.

For a moment he was content to stand exactly the way they were. It had been a long, stressful day and Victor had been absent for most of it, off attending to other duties while the Elite had been monopolized. It didn’t seem as though Victor was about to move until Yuri did either. Granted, he also almost seemed to be frozen in place, stuck not wanting to move either further away or even closer to Yuri.

That wouldn’t do at all. This wasn’t one of Victor’s spontaneous hugs where he was there and gone again in a blink of the eye. If Victor needed something from Yuri, a sign that he was comfortable with their position and actively wanted them to remain that way for however long they could, audience or no audience, then he was going to have to give it to him.

All it took was for Yuri to lean back a few centimeters and reach down to place his hands on where Victor’s were clasped above his abdomen and hold on tight.

He felt Victor give a small jolt of surprise and then he practically melted against Yuri’s back as he even took matters a step further and rested his chin gently in the groove where Yuri’s neck swooped down into his left shoulder.

“Aren’t you two going to come get some food?” Chris had glanced back at them as the three servants were done setting up and were taking their leaves as quickly and quietly as they had arrived. Phichit was more concerned with filling his plate and didn’t even send them the briefest of glances as he shoved the distracted Chris out of his way. “Phichit’s going to eat it all if we don’t hurry.”

“I’m sure they brought plenty. You guys can go first.” As hungry as he’d been earlier, right then Yuri wasn’t in the mood to move away. Besides, the table that had been brought was small enough that they would spend more time bumping elbows than actually getting any food if they all four crowded around it together.

“Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Chris was very obviously confused, but he turned his
attention towards snatching whatever Phichit had been reaching towards rather than saying anything further.

“This is okay?” Victor whispered right into Yuri’s ear as soon as Phichit and Chris started arguing over what looked to be the only slice of pizza with mushrooms on it. Yuri nodded and tightened his grip on Victor’s hands in case the prince got any silly ideas about trying to pull away.

It didn’t take long for their friends to pile their plates full of food and move out of the way so Victor and Yuri could do the same. They separated reluctantly, both of their hands lingering as long as they could.

And if Victor kicked his pallet so that it was almost flush with Yuri’s before he sat down, no one said a word about it.

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After a fairly intense debate, they’d decided on a horror movie marathon due to Halloween being the following week and to counterbalance what Phichit had proclaimed was ‘the depressing, anti-holiday atmosphere that plagues this place’.

Yuri had gone along with Phichit fairly easily. He never had been much of a fan of movies, but he wasn’t particularly picky and the options that Phichit had paraded out to plead his case looked interesting. Victor had been slightly hesitant, but agreed that Phichit had picked out some titles that he’d heard were good and deferred to his judgement after a minor debate. That only left Chris who passionately and dramatically fought for his first choice of a night of romantic comedies on his own.

Chris sulked some and drug his feet, but they eventually all agreed and had everything set up to begin.

They’d all arranged decent sized piles of cushions to lean against and held plates of pizza and chips on their laps. Someone had dimmed the lights and the sounds of rustling and chewing silenced somewhat as the projector at the back of the room kicked into life and the opening strains of music filled the room and the title of the first movie flashed across the screen.

It was so much different than being in an actual move theater, and definitely much better. The thin mattress was soft underneath him and the cushions firm against his back. Victor’s upper arm was pressed up against his ride bicep and Yuri didn’t mind awkwardly eating with his left hand in order
to keep their line of contact unbroken. And he wouldn’t have had a warm poodle curled up at his feet in a real theater either.

Yuri had seen maybe one horror movie in his life up until that point, and he vaguely recalled that it hadn’t been a good one. Mari had spent half the film snickering under her breath and elbowing him in the ribs every time the music turned dramatic. He also remembered that Yuko had kicked Takeshi in the face when he’d grabbed her ankle right before a terribly telegraphed jump scare.

After that, none of them had been particularly thrilled about repeating the experience so they’d purposefully avoided the genre ever since.

This film, however, was good. Very good. It started off slow and built the tension in the background until everything felt like it was ready to boil over. The storyline kept with a traditional type of ghostly haunting in an old home, but by the time the family had caught a glimpse of what had been tormenting them the whole time midway through the film Yuri was half in Victor’s lap. He’d fled there when one of the main characters had dropped a glass with a loud crash when they’d caught sight of a shrouded figure in the mirror out of the corner of their eye.

Victor didn’t seem to mind how or why Yuri had gotten there and he’d grabbed Yuri when he tried to shuffle back to his side in embarrassment and refused to let him go. He’d even gone so far as to maneuver them so that Yuri was completely in his lap with his back pressed against Victor’s warm chest.

Yuri didn’t protest at all. It was a much more comfortable position for both of them and it even allowed for Victor to hide his face in Yuri’s hair during the final climactic confrontation when the music was its loudest and objects were flying across the screen.

Once the credits had begun to roll, Yuri worried he was about to be pushed away. His concern turned out to be more irrational than substantial as Victor didn’t move at all when Phichit hopped up and turned on the lights so he could see to load the next movie.

“It was a good movie, wasn’t it?” Phichit had obviously directed his question to Chris, which Yuri supposed made sense as Chris had been the most vocal opponent to the night’s theme.

“It was fine.” It sounded like Chris had to grit his teeth to say it, but he did admit it. Phichit shot him a firm glare from across the room that caused Chris to let out a loud sigh. “Okay. It was good. A tad on the predictable side, but good. What did you guys think?”
“Well, it was a little predictable, but not in a bad way. Even when you could see something coming it was still pretty scary. I’m not too proud to say I jumped a few times…” Which was a true statement, Yuri thought to himself as Victor went on. He’d felt Victor startle more than once and every time he had, Yuri had jumped with him, though that might have had more to do with being surprised by Victor’s sudden movement than really being affected by the film in any way. “…Don’t you think, Yuri?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” Yuri had been inside his own head and hadn’t heard whatever had been said before the question, but he figured he couldn’t go too terribly wrong with agreeing to whatever Victor’s point had been. “It was definitely a better than the other horror movie I’ve seen… Although, I’m not sure it set too high of a bar to beat. It was truly terrible.”

“If you liked that, then you’ll love this. It’s a true classic.” Phichit adjusted something on the projector and paused on his way to turning out the lights. “Did anyone want a drink or snacks while I’m up?”

“No, I think I’m good.” Yuri was full, warm, and happy at the current moment. As corny and cliché as it sounded even in his own mind, he couldn’t think of a single thing he could want or need that he didn’t currently have. “Thanks, though.”

“I’m good, too.” Victor had craned his neck back to respond, and Yuri took advantage of the opportunity to slide down a little lower in his lap so that he could lay his head against the center of Victor’s chest and rest his full weight against the other man.

“I’ll take another soda if there’s any left.” Chris held up his hands and plucked the plastic bottle Phichit tossed to him out of the air gracefully. “Awesome. Thank you.”

“No problem. They brought plenty of supplies. I suspect we could live down here for a minimum of three days if we really wanted to.” Phichit grabbed a plate and dumped a handful of cookies on it and turned the lights out before he returned to his own spot. “Any longer than that and we might have to start eating each other… Which is a perfect segue to our next movie!”

“This isn’t a zombie movie, is it?” Chris asked and followed up his question with a loud groan when Phichit nodded. “Really? Zombies?”

“Oh, hush. It’s a good one.” Phichit whacked Chris on the upper arm when he grumbled something that Yuri couldn’t hear with the distance between them. Chris shoved him back and then Phichit was shushing them all as the first scene sparked to life on the screen.
“I don’t think I’d mind hiding down here for a while.” Victor whispered as soon as the soundtrack cut in and it would be physically impossible for the others to hear him. “For as long as we can. Longer than three days even.”

“Don’t worry. We can eat them first.” Yuri murmured back, not taking his eyes off the screen, but smirking some as he heard Victor chuckle and felt him place a soft kiss against the top of his head.

Victor had a point, right then, there was nowhere else in the world he would rather be.

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“It was totally adorable. I can’t believe I never have a camera around when I really need it.” Phichit poked Yuri in the side from his spot on the chair next to him. They’d arrived early to their afternoon meeting with the queen and were the only ones in the room at the moment. “It’s starting to become a problem.”

“First of all, there was nothing adorable worth photographing. Second of all, even if you had brought your camera, I would have destroyed whatever pictures you took and it for good measure.” It had been three days since their sleepover in the theater in the basement and Phichit had yet to stop talking about it. Which was to say, he never stopped teasing Yuri about how they’d all woken up that morning to the sight of Yuri curled up on top of Victor instead of his own bedding and using the prince’s chest as his own personal pillow.

At least Phichit refrained from his teasing when anyone but Chris was around, but Yuri would have thought it would have gotten boring by now…

“Come on, Yuri. Don’t be like that.” Phichit poked him again and pouted. “You’re grumpy about it now, but you might want those pictures later. I could have blown them up and ordered prints for your wedding.”

“Absolutely not.” Yuri stated firmly though he felt his lips as they twitched with a poorly suppressed smile. “The last thing I want at my wedding is embarrassing photos of me with the world’s worst behead on display.”

“Boo. You’re no fun.” Phichit laughed and Yuri couldn’t help but laugh along with him. “Fine. We’ll just have to fill the quota of adorable Yuri pictures by dipping into your mother’s stash then.”
Yuri groaned and buried his head in his arms on the table. The worst part was that he knew there would be no stopping Phichit. If he reached out to Mari, and he would because that was exactly something Phichit would think to do, she would give him everything he asked for and more.

“I would beg you not to, but that wouldn’t help, would it?” Yuri didn’t even lift his head as he spoke. He didn’t need to in order to know Phichit was smirking down at him as his eyes sparkled mischievously. “Phichit…”

“Sorry, but the best friend contract you signed is very clear. It’s my job to make sure there is a wide selection of baby Yuri pictures at the reception. I don’t make the rules.”

“I don’t remember signing any such thing.” Yuri grumbled and raised his head to send Phichit a weak glare that was more amusement than ire. “I don’t suspect bribing you would help either?”

“Nope. Not at all!” Phichit sang cheerfully as he reached out and pat Yuri on the back. “Aw… You know you love me.”

“Are you sure I really love you, though? We could just be the victims of the weirdest case of best friends via Stockholm Syndrome ever recorded.” Yuri ducked when Phichit squawked and went to give him a smack on the arm. “I’m kidding! I’m kidding!”

They were laughing hard by the time the others trickled in and Phichit wisely changed the subject to be able to include Guang Hong and Leo who had been the next pair to arrive.

Chris was the next to appear and JJ turned up a few minutes later, bright-eyed and hyped up about the meeting as he often was. As annoying as JJ tended to be, Yuri had to admit that he was always positive about whatever task they’d been set.

The last to arrive was the queen herself, and she drug Yurio along into the room in her wake.

“There has to be something better I could be doing.” Yurio looked as surly and disgruntled as ever, with a scowl on his face and his arms crossed over his chest. “Homework. Speech practice. Literally anything?”
“Sulking in your room all day is not in any way productive.” Lilia’s tone left zero room for argument and Yurio only scuffed his shoe against the carpeted floor and sullenly glared at his feet. “It is more than time for you to take on a few duties of your own, so sit down and please try to keep any disruptiveness to a bare minimum.”

Yurio grumbled something that could either have been ‘yes ma’am’ or ‘fuck off’, but he took up a spot across from Yuri without any further fuss.

“Perfect. Now, apologies for continually putting this meeting off, but my husband and I wanted to make sure we were able to obtain the correct venue before we became too invested in any plans.” Lilia took her own chair at the head of the table and shuffled through her neatly sorted binder. “The good news is that our meetings with the director of the National Ballet went well. She thinks a winter festival is a wonderful idea. We’ll have full use of almost all the complex, barring any living spaces, naturally. Unless there are any other promising suggestions, I would assume we can move right along with planning with this meeting.”

“Do you think we could go and take a tour of the space we have to work with?” JJ instantly jumped in before anyone else could gain their bearings and fully process what Lilia had said. “It would help to have a good idea of the size of the area we’ve been approved to use so we can come up with an appropriate number of vendor spaces to advertise.”

“I’ll see if that can be arranged, but we’ll also be busy planning the Christmas Ball soon enough. If we can’t get you out there, I have been given detailed schematics and both Yuri and myself are more than familiar with the public spaces so we should be more than capable of filling in any blanks.” Lilia removed a pen from the edge of her binder and jotted down a quick note on her papers. “The director thinks anywhere from thirty to forty vendors can fit in the main courtyard in front of the theater depending on how large we are intending on making the booths. There has already been some interest from local businesses and artists…”

The meeting continued on from there as they discussed vendor fees, an application process, and how to best distribute the booths around the property while leaving enough space for foot traffic to flow unimpeded. They discussed different begin and end times, decorations, entertainment, and possible opportunities for small exhibitions of the dancers or workshops the public could participate in.

Yuri listened as best he could and answered questions when they were directed to him, but he found it was almost impossible for him to pay attention. He’d been so caught up in other things that the December charity event had been nothing more than a blip on his radar. A part of him had been aware that it was a possibility that JJ’s Nation Ballet event could have been chosen in the end but he’d always just assumed it would be voted down as soon as someone else came up with another option.
Granted, he’d never come up with a valid alternative either, but he’d been distracted by his other studies and Victor. There was only so much he could focus on at one time.

He wasn’t at all sure how he felt about it. Mostly he felt numb, but he could already tell the nerves and anxiety that had more or less been leaving him alone were going to pop back up in full force once he had a chance to properly process all of the implications of having to return to the place he’d left in shame over half a year ago.

How he was able to listen to any part of the rest of the meeting, Yuri didn’t know. Somehow he must have managed it because no one called him out for drifting off into his own thoughts and he was able to respond to anything directed to him with only his usual level of stuttering and stumbling.

Most of what was discussed was early level brainstorming anyway, so Yuri figured he hadn’t missed much more than people putting forward ideas that would later be tweaked, refined, or even completely discarded by the time everything was said and done.

Caught between his building unease and conscious attempts to remain more or less present at the very least, the time moved surprisingly fast. It had been two hours, but it had felt like the blink of an eye and then everyone stood up and began to give their goodbyes.

They all moved to leave the room at the same time. JJ bounded off after the queen still babbling different ideas and questions as they went. Chris practically bolted as soon as he cleared the door. Yuri wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know what that had been about, but he was sure he’d find out about it secondhand from Phichit sooner or later. That was the beauty of being best friends with the palace gossip. Anything strange or even halfway interesting made its way back to Yuri through Phichit eventually.

Phichit, himself, grabbed Guang Hong and Leo and drug them away down the hall as he chattered on about how he never got to see them outside of meetings anymore and that they really needed to spend more time together.

Yuri went to follow them. No one had singled him out directly and invited him to go along with them, but he knew he was always welcome in their group and he wasn’t in the mood to be alone right then.

He got about three steps down the hall when Yurio wrapped a hand around his wrist and tugged him in the opposite direction.
“Nope. You’re with me until dinner, Katsuki.” Even if there had been any slack in the young prince’s grip, which there wasn’t, Yurio’s tone left Yuri with no hope of getting away. “We need to talk.”

“W-we do?” That was different. Yurio never wanted to talk. Or, even when he did, he never phrased it like that. His typical MO was to meet Yuri in the dance studio so they could smack each other around before spending a handful of minutes talking and then disappearing once his tolerance for conversation had ended.

“We do.” Yurio confirmed. He didn’t say anything further as he led Yuri away from the main body of the building and down a narrow hall.

Yuri stumbled along in confused silence until Yurio found whatever room he’d been looking for. It was some kind of impromptu storage room from the looks of it. There were boxes stacked along the walls or in between some armchairs and low tables which indicated the room might have been yet another parlor in another life.

Now, it was apparently the perfect spot for whatever conversation Yurio wanted to have.

It also looked like a decent spot to hide a body, too, Yuri thought as he noted a thick layer of dust on the furniture. Then he immediately stomped that thought down. Yurio had never shown any inclination to want to kill Yuri before.

And yet…

“How the fuck do you manage to get out of contributing to those meetings?” That had not been what Yuri had been expecting. Yurio seemed to know it, too, and he scoffed and rolled his eyes. “We’ll get to what we really need to discuss soon enough. First, I want to know what you did to make it so Lilia doesn’t try to force you into the discussion if you’ve been quiet for more than two minutes.”

“I’m not actually sure?” Yuri shrugged. He hadn’t thought it was odd that Lilia never truly pulled him into the center of any given conversation like she did the others. Now he did, but he was at a loss to even why or what it might mean. “If I figure it out, you’ll be the first to know.”

Yurio snorted like he wasn’t reassured at all. “Fine. We’ll get back to that some other time. What I really want to know is if you’re done fucking around with my brother’s heart yet.”
Yuri’s knee jerk reaction would have been to shout ‘excuse me’ followed by possibly storming out of the room. It took every last ounce of self-control he possessed not to do it anyway, even after he’d beat the initial urge down.

His second urge was to punch Yurio in the face and then leave. That one was harder to resist until he remembered that he’d never been a violent person and he was more likely to break his own hand instead of doing any real damage. He wasn’t sure it was going to go over well with anyone if he explained that he injured himself attacking a teenager seven years younger than him no matter how well deserved it might have been.

Barring the first two options, his third choice was to stand frozen in place with his mouth hanging open in indignant shock. That was the choice his conflicted brain ended up going with.

Yurio rolled his eyes so hard Yuri was almost worried they would roll right out of his head. “Well? I don’t have all day so spit it the fuck out.”

“Why the hell would you think that?” For the most part, Yurio had never bothered him much. The younger prince insulted and made fun of them all in equal turn. Yuri had never taken offense to any of it, as it was clear half the time Yurio was saying whatever he thought would get the best reaction whether he meant the words or not. This time, though, he was offended. Even more so than he’d ever been in his entire life. “No one’s fucking with anyone. Not that it’s even your business.”

“It is my business.” Yurio didn’t back down an inch. He stood as straight and tall as he could, still about a head shorter than Yuri, but no less imposing for his lack of height when his green eyes were bright and acidic and actively trying to burn a hole through Yuri’s skull. “If you don’t mean any of this and you end up fucking off back home, I’m the one that’s going to have to deal with Victor and his broken heart. I am not going to go through all that with him. Not again.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Yuri almost stunned himself with the ferocity of his words, but he was too angry to give them much mind or, to really clue into how Yurio had said ‘not again’ like there was another time when Victor’s heart had been broken. Not right then. “So long as Victor wants me here, I’m staying. If nothing else has been able to run me off yet, you’re not going to be the one to do it.”

“You’d be surprised. I’ve run off shits more stubborn than you.” Those words had been said with Yurio’s typical gruffness, but the venom that had been dripping from the syllables a minute ago was gone.

“I’m sure you have.” Yuri wasn’t going to argue with that, and he wasn’t about to let his guard down
even if Yurio’s demeanor was more on the relaxed side for him. “I’d prefer it if you wouldn’t as I’m sure there are far more important things we both should spend our time and energy on, but if you feel like you have to give it a try…”

“Tch. I wouldn’t even have to try. If I really wanted to, I could have you running out of here with your tail between your legs before nightfall.” It might have been Yurio’s imagination, but it seemed almost as though Yurio’s scowl had softened somewhat.

Yurio paused there and Yuri bit the inside of his cheek in order to prevent himself from flinching. He might not have been truly scared of the young prince, but that didn’t make his sharp glare any less imposing when the full focus of it was turned on Yuri.

“They got me a fencing instructor. I start lessons next week.” Yurio glanced away as he spoke and Yuri swayed on his feet from the mental whiplash the sudden shift in mood gave him. “You should come. See what a real match looks like. You might learn something that could make you less pathetic at the sport.”

“I… Ah… Sure?” As much as he wanted to push back, Yuri didn’t. He wasn’t entirely sure, but he almost thought that Yurio had maybe approved of him somehow, though why he thought that way or how he knew that, Yuri couldn’t begin to guess. “I’ll talk to Mila and Celestino and make sure they leave room in my schedule.”

“Good. Don’t be late. You’ll embarrass me enough without adding that to the list.” With that, Yurio offered up what Yuri could only describe as the ghost of a true smile before he spun on his heels and stalked off, slamming the door behind him as he went for good measure.

“Yeah, okay… Good talk.” Yuri shook his head and let out a massive exhale as he shoved his hands in his pockets. “What the hell was that?”

Well, standing in an empty storage room talking to himself wasn’t going to get him any answers, and, if he wanted to be honest with himself, he already knew what that brief confrontation had been about.

For once, this had been one test he was sure he’d passed.

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A note came for Yuri two days after his confrontation with Yurio, if that was even what it had been. Yuri was still confused and unsettled about the event even days later and there’d been a weird tension that popped up whenever Yurio and Yuri ended up somewhere together with fewer than two additional people to act as buffers.

Whatever that awkwardness was, Yuri was confident it would eventually fade. The more important issue was why the palace doctor had sent him a note asking for Yuri to come see him whenever he got the chance along with a list of openings in the doctor’s schedule if Yuri couldn’t make it that afternoon.

“Stop worrying. If it was something bad, I’m sure he would have shown up to come get you in person. The Royal Family certainly doesn’t pay him to sit around waiting for them to clear their always busy schedules when they have a pressing medical need.” Minako watched Yuri in obvious amusement as he read the note for what had to have been the twentieth time in five minutes. “You’ve got half an hour before lunch. If it’s bothering you so much, go now. If it takes longer than that, I can let everyone know where you are.”

“But what if it is something bad?” Yuri knew in his head that it was stupid to worry like he was and that Minako was as right as she always was, but he couldn’t help the swarm of nerves that made it hard to breathe, much less think logically. “I could be dying, you know…”

“Something tells me that’s not it.” Minako pat him on the top of his head and grinned in the face of his disgruntled glare. “You’re always so quick to assume the negative outcome. You could try to be a little more positive every once in a while. Shake things up some. It might help you feel better if nothing else.”

“Easier said than done.” Yuri grumbled and tossed the note on his desk with a loud sigh. It wasn’t like staring at it was going to give him any answers no matter how long he committed to it. “You’re right about getting it out of the way and just going now.”

“I’m always right.” Minako danced gleefully out of the way as Yuri put out his foot to trip her. “About everything, too. The sooner you all realize you should listen to me, the better it’ll be for all of us, I promise. Just ask Victor. He knows.”

“And yet he doesn’t listen to you either.” Yuri pointed out even as he moved towards the door. “Speaking of… If I’m going to be late for lunch, can you make sure Victor knows where I am, too, and not just Mila and Celestino?”

“Of course.” Minako agreed cheerfully. “Is there anything else you think you’ll need this afternoon.”
“Not that I can think of.” Yuri shrugged. “Nothing I wouldn’t be able to get on my own, I’m sure. See you again before dinner then?”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ve gone ahead and given Mila your notes for your afternoon meeting, so she’ll make sure you get them. Other than that, I’ll have my pager on my if you really need me.” Minako tapped her index finger against the pager clipped to her pants pocket. “If you miss lunch, you can ask Sariah in the kitchen to bring you up something to the meeting room. I’ll make sure to give her a head’s up to let her know you might be asking.”

“Thanks, Minako. You really are the best.” And Yuri meant that. Her general nosiness and insistence that he get out of bed at a decent time every morning through any means necessary notwithstanding, she had been a true rock of support and advice any time Yuri had needed it.

“I know, I know. Go on, kid. Stop stalling and rip off the band-aid.” Minako waved him out the door and Yuri went without further prompting.

As much as Yuri was tempted to take the less direct route and continue to stall now that Minako wasn’t there to stop him, he didn’t. There was always the very likely chance that the longer he gave himself to think about it, the more likely he was to turn around and not go at all. Which wasn’t going to help his anxiety or add any more days to his ‘panic attack free’ counter.

So, he forced himself to march to the far southern corner of the building where the royal doctor, Dr. Richards, had a few rooms set aside for examining patients, performing minor procedures, and an office to use when he was on the property. The rooms were small and out of the way, probably to ensure as much privacy as possibly for any patients, but it didn’t take long for Yuri to find himself standing in front of the door to the office as he knocked against the wood lightly.

There were the sounds of shuffling from inside and then the door swung open to reveal Dr. Richards standing on the other side. He was an older man, tall and slender with thinning white hair and a constantly harried look about him, but his green eyes brightened significantly when he caught sight of Yuri.

“Ah, Yuri, I was wondering when you would get a spare moment. They’ve been keeping you pretty busy these days, I guess. My assistant had a hard time even tracking Minako down to give her my note.” The doctor stepped back and motioned for Yuri to follow him into the office. “Come on in. This shouldn’t take long.”
Yuri nodded and followed him into the room, taking up the seat that was offered him with a polite thanks.

“How have you been feeling? It’s been some time since I’ve seen you.” Dr. Richards took up his own seat on the other side of his desk and sent Yuri a reassuring smile. A gesture that went a long way to putting Yuri at ease.

“I’ve been fine. A little sore sometimes when I overdo it, but nothing I’m not used to.” Yuri shrugged. “Honestly, most of the time it feels like normal. I’ve been wearing the soft brace you gave me when I dance or fence to stay on the safe side, but it really feels great ninety-five percent of the time.”

“That’s good to hear.” Dr. Richards pushed around some papers on his desk and grabbed a folder. He flipped it open and looked back up at Yuri. “And the other five percent? Are you still having some of those sharp pains you were having back in July?”

“No, not really.” Yuri tried to think back just in case he was forgetting something, but nothing sprung to mind. “Just general soreness. It’s maybe a little more tender than my left knee when I’ve been doing a lot of jumping, but, other than that, I haven’t had much pain at all.”

“Perfect. That’s what I was hoping to hear.” This time the doctor grabbed what looked to be a small jump drive and rose to his feet, plugging it into a screen mounted against the closest wall. He waited until some images loaded up on the screen to continue. “Do you remember when I insisted on taking a new set of MRIs after you first got here?”

Yuri nodded. That he definitely remembered. He’d worried about the cost of the expensive test which had led to him putting it off for so long that the doctor had finally sent Minako to corner him and remind him that the Royal Family was footing the bill for any necessary care any of the Selected might need. It was impossible to forget being drug through the halls by his ear while Minako lecture him about taking care of his health in as loud a voice as possible.

“Well, I sent them out to a colleague of mine in order to get a second opinion. From what I could see, everything looked like it was healing well, as we discussed at the time, but I’m a general practitioner officially, and my knowledge of orthopedics is firm but not necessarily on an expert’s level, so I felt more comfortable having someone I trusted do a double check.” Dr. Richards offered Yuri another one of his calming smiles. “You know, just to make sure I didn’t miss anything.”

“That, um, sounds reasonable.” Yuri fidgeted some in his chair. The doctor didn’t look like he was holding onto bad news per se, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t any bad news to be had. “So… Did
they, uh, find anything?”

“That’s the crux of it actually. Neither of us found a thing.” Dr. Richards pointed to a shadowy spot on the image. “This is the spot we expected to find the previously diagnosed tear based off the written records the ballet’s doctor sent us, but neither my colleague nor I can see any evidence there ever was a tear. We requested a copy of the original MRI you had done for a comparison, and, after a lot of stalling and back and forth, we finally got it last week.”

The doctor clicked a button and the image shrunk some and moved to the side as another image popped up beside it. He pointed to a much larger shadow on the second image right around the same place as the much smaller one on the first one.

“See? There is no way a tear this large was able to heal itself down to just a smattering of scar tissue from February to May. Especially since you didn’t even have any surgery to repair it.” The doctor clucked and pointed at what even Yuri’s untrained eyes could tell was an oddly pointed tip at the base of the dark spot. “From what we’ve been able to tell, our best guess is something got in the way of taking a clear picture somehow. Maybe a marker trying to point out where the ballet’s doctor thought the tear might be? We not entirely sure what it was, but it’s definitely not a tendon tear, especially with how much progress you’ve made with your recovery.”

“W-what?” Yuri blinked hard and cleared his throat, mercilessly shoving down the burst of hope that had caught there. “What does that mean?”

“In the simplest terms, it means we’re confident there never was a tear at all. We can’t be one hundred percent certain on a true diagnosis since all we have is a bad image and one good image taken months after the initial injury, but I’m pretty sure it was a bad sprain. Perhaps even coupled with a deep bone bruise considering the report we received stated you landed directly on your patella… That is, your kneecap, when you came down.” Dr. Richards tapped another button and the clear image went back to full screen. “The scan we took in May shows some light scar tissues, but nothing truly concerning. It may always feel a bit tighter than your left knee, but there’s no reason why it won’t function at the full range of motion it did before your injury.”

“I’d suggest wearing the soft brace if you’re concerned, and there is the possibility you might want someone to perform a minor surgery several years from now if that scar tissue really begins to bother you…” The doctor turned off the screen and sat down on the corner of his desk. “I really don’t see any reason why you can’t proceed to increase your fitness level back to where it was before if you wanted to.”

“Seriously?” Yuri wasn’t exactly sure what he felt in that moment. It was like a million different emotions were all clawing their way to the surface at the same time, but the prevailing one seemed to be excitement. “You mean I could dance professionally again if I wanted to? I could perform?”
“I don’t see why not. If that’s what you wanted.” Dr. Richards gave him a firm pat on the shoulder. “We can take another MRI if you’d prefer, but I’m positive it’s going to show everything in working order. You know how it feels when you hit your limits, and I’m not going to say you don’t need to be careful, but there is absolutely no reason why you wouldn’t be able to maintain a performance schedule if that’s what you really wanted to do…”

There was more, with the good doctor there always was, but Yuri didn’t pay it any more than the bare minimum of attention. He could listen to the doctor suggest new physical therapy exercises and politely accept his offer to set up a follow-up appointment on autopilot. What he really cared to focus on was what came before.

He could dance again. Exactly like he used to. He could perform if he wanted to. He could theoretically go back to the life he’d loved for so long if he so chose. The only life he’d ever wanted to lead. It was all right there for him if he wanted to reach out and take it.

But he loved more than just dancing now. There was something else waiting for him, a life he’d never dreamed of, but one he found himself wanting to cling to none the less.

Yuri could dance again. He could feel the warmth of the spotlight on his face and the buzz of adrenaline running through his limbs from the eyes of the audience in a way that he’d thought had been lost to him forever.

He could fly again, the way he still often longed to do.

But did he really want that anymore?

Yuri didn’t know the answer to that.
First of all, I am so very sorry for how long it took to get this update out. I swear I am going to finish this story. I would never abandon it.

With that being said, it's been a rough few months for me. I started a second job which has eaten up a lot of my time and energy and I had an emotional few weeks where I had a serious conversation with my trainer and we both agreed for me to sell Monroe back to the barn and purchase a younger horse with a lot more talent. It was probably one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I've had Monroe for four years and she saw me through a lot of rough patches and dark spots. It helps that I'm still going to get to see her all the time and know she's safe and taken care of, and I love my new horse (her name's Bunny and she's super cute!), but I wasn't exactly in the best of writing moods while we were going through all that...

Hopefully 2018 will see some things turning around for me. Either way, I hope to be able to update more frequently and maybe catch up on responding to all of your amazing comments one of these days! :)
November wind and collected Makkachin for a brisk walk through the gardens. The poodle looked up from where he’d been sniffing a small pile of dead leaves at the sound of Yuri’s voice and he smiled up at Yuri with his big tongue lolling out. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. You’re such a good boy.”

Makkachin let out a happy bark as Yuri pat him on the head before the poodle bounded off after a flicker of movement underneath a nearby bush.

The poodle’s approval notwithstanding, Yuri still couldn’t help but feel slightly guilty. What he’d said had been technically true, but Yuri was self-aware enough to recognize a lie of omission as much as any other kind. The fact of the matter was that he had a lot on his mind and he hadn’t told a single soul that he was more concerned about what he’d found out in regards to his knee than he was with planning any stupid charity event or ball.

Makkachin met up with him as he rounded a corner into the, now bare, rose garden. The poodle dropped a dirty tennis ball at his feet and stared up at him expectantly.

“It must be nice to have nothing more important than belly rubs and missing tennis balls on your mind.” Yuri gave the dog a deep scratch behind his ears and picked up the ball with a gloved hand. “What do you think, buddy? Is it too late for me to just quit everything and become a dog?”

When Makkachin didn’t do anything other than to start to drool a little bit, Yuri sighed and threw the ball. He smiled as the poodle bolted off after it. “At least you listen even if you don’t ever really answer me.”

Of course, if he had wanted answers he would have been talking to a person and not a dog. Not that it mattered much. For once, the only person who could answer his questions was himself and even the thought of bouncing his own thoughts off anyone else felt wrong.

What did feel right was being outside for a change, though. It was certainly cold enough to have him huddled deep into the navy coat Minako had acquired for him the week before, but it wasn’t windy today and the sun that streamed down from overhead kept him warm enough so long as he kept moving. The cold air even helped to clear his mind some and periodically asking Makkachin pointless questions whenever he returned with a ball or a stick to throw relieved some of the tension he’d been carrying around all week.

He never did get any answers, but he felt much better by the time he returned to his room to get ready for dinner with Victor’s dog in tow.
“You look surprisingly light hearted and well-rested for a change.” Minako had been dusting off his empty book shelves when Yuri had walked in, and she paused and turned in his direction as soon as he cleared the threshold into the room. “Happiness looks good on you.”

“Um, thanks?” Yuri was sure that had been meant to be a compliment, but he wasn’t entirely sure what Minako had been meaning to compliment at all. Of course, it wasn’t like he was unhappy per se, a little conflicted perhaps, but he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around why Minako thought he looked any different than he always did.

And why she’d settled on happy as a descriptor was something he couldn’t even begin to fathom.

“Why are you suddenly looking worried? You’re cute when you’re in a good mood.” Minako jabbed her duster in his general direction and Yuri took an instinctive step back even though almost the entire room was between them just in case she thought about closing the distance and poking him for real. “And you’ve been in a good mood more often than not these days.”

“Have I?” Yuri supposed it had to be true. Minako wouldn’t lie to him, not even to make him feel better, and he did have to admit that he was in generally good spirits when he wasn’t internally debating what he’d found out from the doctor the week before and what, if anything, he was going to do with that information.

He took a seat on the edge of his bed as he thought it over, welcoming Makkachin into his lap when the big dog followed him up. “I dunno. I guess I have been, or maybe I’m finally just more comfortable around here at last.”

“That must be it.” Minako’s smile turned into something almost tender that had Yuri shifting some on the bed as he fought down the urge to bury his face into Makkachin’s fur in order to avoid any further scrutiny. “In any case, it suits you. Now, did you want me to take this puppy back to his rightful owner after you leave for dinner, or did you want Prince Victor to come pick him up from you later?”

“I think… I think I’d like Victor to pick him up later. He was pretty sure earlier that he didn’t have anything scheduled for after dinner.” Yuri rubbed absently against the perpetually itchy spot behind Makkachin’s ears as the dog wagged his tail languidly in approval. “If that’s changed, we can always have you return him after dinner… If that’s okay with you, of course.”

“I’ll be sure to clear my evening schedule on the off chance my assistance is needed.” Minako joked
as she turned back to her dusting. “It appears as though I’ll be needed here in any case.”

“I’m pretty sure I can put myself to bed if you have other things you need to be doing.” Yuri pointed out. He never had quite gotten used to Minako’s hovering at bedtime, even though he knew she was only doing her job and that she meant well. “I’m not sure if you were aware, but I’ve managed to find my own sleep clothes and tuck myself in for most of my life before I came here. I’m sure I’ll be able to remember how I did it for one night.”

“I have all the faith in the world that you’d remember how to put yourself to bed just fine.” Minako turned back around and brandished her duster in his direction again. “Now you listen here. I’ve been nice and I’ve allowed for some aspects of my job to slip by because you’re a good kid and I mostly trust you even though I don’t trust Victor as far as I can throw him, but… Now that we’re this late in the game, I’m going to have to put my foot down. If you want the prince to come to your room for any reason from this point out, I’m going to be there to chaperone. I’m afraid we’re beyond the point where sweet, loyal Makkachin counts in that regard.”

“I really don’t think we need a chaperone for a five minute conversation when Victor comes to get his dog. I wouldn’t worry about it.” Yuri moved on from scratching said poodle behind the ears to begin smoothing down the puffy curls on the top of his head. “Take the time off while you have the chance. I’m getting the feeling we’re not going to get much downtime in the next few weeks.”

“I’m going to level with you here, Yuri, and I want you to understand that all that crap I’ve already let you get away with was because I like you and I trust you.” Minako looked serious, more serious than usual and Yuri sat up and had to beat down the urge to shift around under her stern gaze. “We’ve been breaking the rules some… Actually, we’ve been breaking the rules a lot. Technically, while Victor is allowed to go into any of your rooms whenever any of you like, any time he’s in here I’m supposed to be in the room. Otherwise the door is supposed to remain open. That, um, also goes for any late-night wanderings. I know we never went over the rules in the beginning, but if you are going to potentially meet up with Victor after hours you’re supposed to call for me so either I or someone else can accompany you…”

“That… That unfortunately makes sense even though it is definitely one of the top five most ridiculous things I have ever heard in my entire life.” He’d never bothered to think much about the rules of the competition after the first week or so he’d been there, operating under the assumption that someone would stop him if he tried to do something he wasn’t supposed to.

Granted, the person that was usually around when a question of ‘are we allowed to do this’ came up was Victor, and Yuri was already certain that Victor’s interpretation of the rules and what the rules actually were tended to not be exactly the same. “I’m not already in trouble and I just don’t know it yet, am I?”
“Probably not. I mean… I haven’t heard that you are, but…” Minako’s expression suddenly softened some. “It’s getting closer and closer to the end of this whole thing and I don’t want trouble to come find you if we can avoid it. You’ll have plenty of time for that later on down the road.”

“You mean when they don’t have many options to send me home.” Yuri finished for her. There was no use beating around the bush with Minako at that point any longer. They both knew that the only way Yuri was staying past Christmas was with an accepted engagement and no one would be quick to suggest send home the Crown Prince’s fiancé for a minor rule infraction. At least no one who wanted to keep their cushy palace jobs.

“Exactly.” If Minako was surprised by his easy acceptance, she didn’t show it. It anything, she looked almost proud, though Yuri was at a loss as to what there was to be proud of. “So, from this point out it’s chaperones or open doors when you’re in your room and ringing for me if you want to meet up past your bedtime.”

“You do know that I’m not the one you’re going to have to convince, right?” As much as Yuri felt strangled by the thought of having Minako suddenly hovering around at the most inopportune moments, he wasn’t about to put up a fight. Besides, he knew enough about Minako by now to know would never make her presence uncomfortable or oppressive.

She also had a firm habit of being able to say ‘no’ to him whenever she deemed it necessary, and he could see a losing battle before he started to fight it.

“Oh, I know, but I figured if I got you on board up front, then we can deal with our petulant prince together.” Minako seemed cheerful enough, but Yuri had a strong feeling that convincing Victor to actually adhere to the rules even for such a short period of time wasn’t going to be as easy as batting their eyes and asking nicely. “Don’t give me that sour look. It’s only for another month and a half. You can both deal with it for at least that long and then you can go back to pretending that you don’t notice which rules apply to you and which ones don’t.”

“If the rules were really so important this whole time you could have reminded me of them at any time.” Yuri teased and his attendant laughed. “Thank you for letting me get away with things, though. Honestly, Minako, I don’t know what I would have done without you this whole time. I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Don’t thank me just yet. We’re not completely out of the woods.” Minako took a few steps forward and sank down onto the opposite end of the bed and ran a hand through the thick fur on Makkachin’s back. “I really do appreciate that you don’t feel the need to ring for me whenever you need any little thing, but you can call me a bit more often if you need or want someone to talk to about the stupider aspects of how things are run around here. I think… I think you might need that more than ever these next few weeks. It’s kind of why I’ve stuck around for so long. Well, that and
you’re easy to take care of and I like you.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’ve done a lot more to help me than I’ll ever know?” Yuri asked the question even though he knew she wasn’t going to give him an answer.

“Don’t worry about it. Everything I’ve done had been as much for the prince as it’s been for you.” Minako winked at him before sobering up some. “I want you to feel comfortable and happy here if this is somewhere you want to stay. I know you didn’t know Victor before you got here, but he’s changed some, too. It’s been a change for the better, I have to say. He’s happier than I’ve seen him since he was a kid and that’s because of you.”

It was instinctual for Yuri to open his mouth to either flat out deny that statement, or, at the very least, demur and insist he couldn’t be the fundamental part of whatever had been the catalyst to Victor’s supposed change. Maybe if he’d had this conversation with Minako two weeks previous, he wouldn’t have stopped himself from doing so.

There wasn’t a point in wasting his breath doing so, however, and he changed tact before the words could even leave his mouth.

“Thank you.” Yuri grinned as a look of mild confusion crossed Minako’s face. “For caring about him enough to notice. He’s been lucky to have you all this time.”

“You’re darn right he’s been. And now you’re the lucky one.” Minako smiled brightly as she stopped petting the poodle in order to ruffle Yuri’s hair. “Now, you don’t have much longer until dinner. Off to the shower with you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Yuri offered up a sharp salute as he stood and danced out of range of Minako’s long arms as she tried to smack him for it.

Her bubbling laughter followed him into the bathroom as well as a feeling of accomplishment that had been dodging him for the past week.

Whatever it was he decided to do or not do with the news he’d received about his knee, he knew he had support outside of Victor that would be there for him should he choose to stay.

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Whenever Yuri was stressed, his first instinct had always been to dance his way through it. That process didn’t necessarily mean he ended up making a good decision or the right choice in the end, but it did significantly help with calming his whirling thoughts enough that he wasn’t paralyzed with indecision to the point where he couldn’t make any decision at all, neither good nor bad.

He wasn’t exactly what he would have described as ‘stressed’ per se, but he was definitely something. Yuri felt like he was full to the brim with raw, undirected energy in a way that was reminiscent of his first few weeks at the National Ballet. It was like his body knew he was on the edge of something important even as his mind struggled to understand what that was.

His schedule was packed so full that he could barely squeeze in enough time to breathe, but Minako was vicious on his behalf when it came to scheduling his days with Mila and Celestino to include some time for him to spend in the studio if he chose to take it. On the days when he was set to share a fencing lesson with Yurio, he always had enough time to make it happen and on days when he didn’t there was an hour or two set aside that were designated as study or rest time.

Of course, those times were always spent in the studio and not studying or resting, but no one seemed to notice or care about that little detail.

For the most part he went alone. Sometimes Phichit would come with him and offer to run Yuri’s music for him so he wouldn’t have to run back and forth to the sound system every time he wanted to work on a specific section. Once, Chris even accompanied them and twice Yurio had shown up stating that he wanted to fence, but had then proceeded to refuse to let Yuri stop what he was doing in order to drag the necessary equipment out.

As much as he was coming to enjoy his friends’ company, even in times when he would have usually wanted to be alone in the past, it was a fair bit difficult to be totally inside his own head whenever they were around. Even when they were quietly keeping to themselves, which both Chris and Yurio did, he was still very much aware of their presence.

And then there was Phichit, who Yuri was pretty sure didn’t actually know how to sit still and quiet and out of the way.

“I don’t know, Yuri. I think it looked better when you did that move where you had that crazy arch in your back at the moment when the piano went all soft and tinkly.” It didn’t help that Phichit had also apparently decided he was the perfect person to be Yuri’s assistant choreographer despite not actually having any real training for the job other than being able to recognize bits that looked ‘really cool’ to recommend him for the position.
“I know. It felt better that way, too, but that’s kind of part of the process of creating new choreography. If I didn’t try to adjust bits and pieces, then I wouldn’t know for sure if that move made the most sense or not.” Yuri paused and wiped some sweat that was about to drop into his eyes off his forehead with the back of his hand. “Can you replay that last section again? I think I liked the slower turns and the footwork I moved to the back of the program might go well before what you call the crazy back arch move, but I want to make sure it meshes well with the beat of the music there.”

“Can do, Boss.” Phichit grinned and fiddled with where Yuri’s music player was resting in his lap. “Alright. Ten second delay starts… Now.”

Although, sometimes Phichit’s commentary was helpful as he could see things that Yuri couldn’t, and he was precise to a fault when it came to starting the music right on time.

Yuri motioned for his friend to cut off the song a few steps past the section that had been giving him problems, taking a few extra turns for fun as the music faded.

“That felt a lot better.” Yuri rolled his head from side to side until his neck popped. “Did it look better to you like that?”

“It looked great!” Phichit clapped his hands together to punctuate his exclamation. “You’ve got the first half and that transition spot looking amazing! Are you going to work on the end bit again?”

“I don’t think so.” The back half of that particular dance was still a mess, mostly because Yuri’s own mind was still a mess. He’d had some kind of vague idea of having this dance almost mirror his own life and journey in a way.

Which had been a great idea when he’d been fairly certain about where the next steps on his journey might have led him. Now, however, that ending was less clear to him than ever before and the back half of his program reflected the uncertainty he was feeling. Uncertainty that was not something he wanted Phichit to get a glimpse of, even if it was unlikely that his friend would really understand the depths of what that tangled mess might mean.

“How much time do we have left?” Yuri asked, more to avoid having to speak anymore on the subject that any real desire to know how much time they had left to squander before someone might come looking to corral them back to where they needed to be.
Phichit grabbed Yuri’s discarded watch and checked it with a quick glance. “Over an hour. You’ve got plenty of time if you wanted to work some more.”

“Over an hour? How?” Yuri knew he’d always had a bad habit of losing time when he was dancing, but it usually was the other way around and he would end up dancing well past the time he was supposed to stop. “Please don’t make us late again. I thought Queen Lilia was going to glare a hole through our skulls last time.”

“We’re not going to be late. They pushed the meeting back some for who knows what reason. Mila caught me to tell me on my way here. She would have caught you, too, if you hadn’t wandered off after Victor like an adorably lovesick puppy once they let us out of that treaty review meeting.” Phichit paused here as though he were waiting for Yuri to have some kind of comment or response to that. When Yuri maintained a stubborn silence instead, he went on. “I’m honestly surprised she still didn’t go off and look for you on her own. For some reason they don’t usually trust me to pass on messages… Although, you did have a seriously determined looked on your face when you left, so maybe she was concerned about what she might walk in on if she went after you…”

“I’m not sure what you want me to admit to.” That was a lie. Yuri had a very good idea of the information Phichit had been fishing for, but that didn’t mean he was going to give it up easily. “The last time I checked, it isn’t a crime to want to take a minute to talk to Victor in private.”

“Pretty sure you weren’t just ‘talking’.” As that statement had been muttered under Phichit’s breath instead of stated clearly, Yuri didn’t deign to give it a response either, much to Phichit’s utter disappointment if the scowl on his face was any indication. “Yuri… Do we have to go over the rules and regulations for best friendship again?”

“You act like we wandered off to have some kind of earth shattering personal moment. You do know that not every time Victor and I meet ends up with some kind of special or life affirming moment happening, right?” Yuri found he was actually kind of serious about that, too. He’d been much better about coming to Phichit whenever there was something of import worth sharing. That didn’t mean he felt the need to consult with his friend every time he wanted to kiss his boyfriend. “It really can just be as simple as us wanting to spend a few minutes alone together because we legitimately enjoy each other’s company.”

“More like you both enjoy making out with each other.” This time Yuri glared as Phichit mumbled out that statement. “What? It’s not like we don’t know that the two of you indulge in more than just talking to each other, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, Phichit, I know what you mean.” Yuri let out a quiet sigh and stretched his back by twisting
around twice in a vague attempt to keep his muscles loose in case Phichit let him get back to dancing.

“Why does it matter to you so much? Are you trying to apply to be on the rotation of chaperones that have suddenly been deemed absolutely necessary by the powers that be?”

“I don’t know. Are they accepting applications?” Even though Yuri knew that had been meant as a joke, he still sent a firm glare in his friend’s direction. A gesture that caused Phichit’s eyes to widen and for him to throw up his hands in surrender. “Got it. Sore subject… They’ve really got people following you around in order to make sure you aren’t alone with Victor?”

“Ugh. Yes. Ever since four days ago.” Giving up on getting anymore work done, Yuri flopped down onto the ground and began his usual cool down stretches. “I wish I knew what triggered it, but the only person who will even talk to me about it is Minako and she’s not saying if she knows any reason as to why this is happening now of all times.”

“Victor doesn’t know either?” Phichit asked.

“He seems just as irritated and confused as I am.” Although Yuri wasn’t sure how much of Victor’s confusion was genuine as opposed to just for show. It was hard to believe such a change in routine wasn’t at least discussed with the prince first or that Victor couldn’t get the answer if he really wanted to, but the reason didn’t matter much to Yuri since knowing why wasn’t going to make it stop, so he had never pressed. “I doubt it matters why. It’s not like they are going to stop just because I found out the root cause.”

“I guess you’re right, but that sounds so annoying.” Phichit let out a disgusted sounding sigh. “Thank god I figured out when I did that I don’t want to date royalty. It’s starting to sound like a huge hassle more than anything else.”

“There are other perks…” One of them being Victor himself, but Yuri figured that prize wasn’t exactly something Phichit would care much about. It wasn’t like Phichit didn’t get along with the prince, because he did, but it was pretty obvious when Yuri observed them together that they were both a lot more comfortable as friends than anything else.

Not that Yuri was even worried at all about Victor’s attention wandering any longer. He certainly worried about other things, but that was no longer one of them.

“Are there?” Phichit asked, though the question was phrased with more curiosity than sarcasm this time. “And what would those perks be?”
“The food here is good. And free.”

“Okay. I’ll give you that one. Free, delicious food is always a plus on any list.” Phichit arched an eyebrow and made a gesture with his right hand. “Do go on.”

“Okay…” Yuri should have known Phichit would have been serious and wouldn’t let Yuri off the hook so easily. “Okay, this might just be a perk for me, but I am enjoying having a private dance studio I can use whenever I want instead of having to share or schedule time around lessons and rehearsals.”

“Agreed. That is a ‘you’ perk, but I’ll you have that one as I am quite fond of having a movie theater that plays whatever I want without having to deal with sticky floors and the one crying child that always inexplicably pops up somehow.” Phichit rolled Yuri his water bottle over to him as Yuri leaned over to grab it. “So, we have food and private facilities. I guess, in that vein, it’s nice to have attendants and maids to clean up after us.”

“I could actually do just fine without all that. You don’t think it’s weird that people could be poking around in your stuff when they’re cleaning?” Yuri did have to admit to himself that part might have just been his own anxiety as Phichit merely shrugged in response. “Whatever. I still don’t count that as a perk. As much as I adore Minako, I have always been perfectly capable of laying out my own clothes for the day and cleaning my own room.”

“Here is where we are going to have to politely disagree. As someone who had shared a room with a messy younger brother for about half of my life, I’m never going to say no to any arrangement where my room is magically clean and fresh for me every evening.” Phichit hopped up to his feet and moved over to roll up the long cord that had attached Yuri’s music player to the sound system. “I do have to admit that I’m going to kind of miss this place once I go home. I’ve kind of started to like it here.”

Yuri was quiet for a long moment after that. Somehow, he’d never connected the dots enough to realize that Phichit wasn’t going to always be there.

The more he thought about it, the more his mood fell. Phichit had always been there. He’d been the first person Yuri had met at the airport. They sat together on the plane that had brought them to Angeles and Phichit had sat beside him at every meal until they had been whittled down to the Elite and the assigned seating had begun.

Any time they’d been entrusted with a new duty or had been forced to spend long days in etiquette lessons, Phichit had been there to keep his spirits up. At that point, Yuri was sure Phichit was at least
50% of his emotional support system. Hell, for the most part, Yuri spent more time with Phichit during the average day than he did with Victor.

And in a month or so, Phichit would be gone.

“Not to be a downer and contribute to the sudden mood plummet in here, but what’s up?” Phichit looked truly concerned and Yuri tried to perk up some as he pulled up out of a deep stretch “Was it something I said?”

“Kind of.” Yuri admitted. He paused in order to take a swig from his water bottle in the hopes of using the delay to pull his thoughts together. “I… I just never thought about the fact that once this is over, you’re going to go home. I guess I’ve kind of gotten used to you hanging around all the time…”

“I’m going to miss you, too, but we’ll call each other and write. Maybe I’ll even be able to convince you to get a mobile phone so we can send each other pictures, and you never know what could happen in the future. I’ve got a whole new life to plan for, now that I’m a Three. There’s always a chance that once I find my new calling I might move back out this way and then I’ll be able to visit whenever.” Phichit held out a hand and pulled Yuri up off the floor. “Don’t worry about it at all, Yuri. There’s no way in hell I’m going to forget about you and I think we both know it’s impossible for anyone to forget me, so we’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re way too annoying to leave me alone for the rest of my life…” Yuri ended up with a gentle elbow nudge to the ribs for that comment, but Phichit was giggling as well so he figured his friend wasn’t truly offended. “Sorry, it just took me by surprise. It’s one thing to know that this thing is going to come to an end one day and another thing to really know that.”

“Dude, I get it. This whole process has been like some kind of strange out of body experience. I can’t even imagine how it’s been for you.” Phichit took a step back as Yuri moved to gather his things. “I mean, I logically knew when I applied that staying here forever might be an option on the table, but I figured out pretty quickly that Victor had less than zero romantic interest in me. After that, it was pretty easy to mentally prepare myself to go home eventually.”

“I always thought I was going to go home. I really expected to last a week, maybe two tops, but then I didn’t get asked to leave after two weeks or two months…” Yuri bit at his bottom lip and fiddled nervously with the strap of his bag. “For a long time, I kept expecting it would come eventually. That, I don’t know, Victor would come to his senses and realize there were better options for him, but that never happened… I still sometimes can’t believe that I really might stay… That this is very close to being my life forever.”
“It’s not a bad choice for you, all things considered.” Phichit purposefully kept his tone light and Yuri wanted to thank him for his consideration. He had enough serious debates about this topic inside his own head without getting too distressed or upset about it with Phichit as well. “I’m not going to lie, you looked crazy nervous and uncomfortable those first few months, but now you seem settled and surer of yourself. You do a pretty good job, too. People listen to you, even when they don’t want to, and you’d have to be blind not to see that Victor adores you.”

“You’re right. I could certainly do worse.” Minako had mentioned how Yuri seemed different the week before, too. Well, he definitely felt different, and, if Phichit noticed it, too, then it must be true. It sounded like whatever they were seeing in him was a positive change in any case. “I’m still going to miss you.”

“Of course, you will. Who wouldn’t?” Yuri was very tempted to release a sardonic comment about how he wouldn’t anymore, but Phichit was too fast for him and cut him off. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to say anything. I know how important I am.”

It went without saying that Phichit was right. That didn’t mean they refrained from teasing each other on the way back to their rooms.

Spending time with Phichit was always good for taking Yuri’s mind off of other matters. It was hard to brood when Phichit made it his mission in life to ensure Yuri was laughing so hard he could barely breathe the whole time and any time the conversation dipped into serious waters, he would listen, give good advice, and not let either of them linger over negative details.

Yuri really was going to miss him.

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“I don’t get to see you enough anymore.”

It was cold, almost too cold to really enjoy a walk in the garden, but Yuri and Victor had retreated there with Makkachin anyway. They’d found through trial and error that the only place they weren’t tailed by well-meaning staff/chaperones was when they were outside.

And that was only because they had cameras following them around in their place.
At first blush, it didn’t seem like a fair trade, but the cameras were required to stay at a much further distance and were a lot easier to lose temporarily by weaving around bushes and trees. It didn’t give them as much privacy as they would like, but the cameras were ordered to stay out of hearing range so it was more privacy than what chaperones would have afforded them.

“I know. I don’t get to see you enough either.” Which really wasn’t a strictly true statement. They saw each other at every meal and usually had at least one meeting per day together, but that wasn’t the same and they both knew it. “I hang out in the dance studio most afternoons when I’ve got time off. If we promise to leave the blinds on those huge windows open the whole time, maybe they’ll let you visit me there?”

“You would… You would want that? You wouldn’t mind?” If Yuri would have minded before, he certainly didn’t now. Not when Victor sounded so excited and hopeful, like Yuri was offering him a gift he’d been waiting for forever.

“I wouldn’t mind. If I really want to work on something alone, I’ll let you know, but I really wouldn’t mind you being there.” Yuri reached out and grabbed Victor’s gloved hand, wishing for a moment that it was warm enough to forgo gloves right then. “If you can get away and I’m out there, don’t even hesitate, okay?”

“That can definitely be arranged.” Victor grinned down at him and Yuri was sure he was about to be kissed when Makkachin came up to them and dropped his ball at their feet with a loud bark to get their attention.

The mood interrupted, Yuri bent down and grabbed the ball with his free hand and threw it as far as he could without letting go of Victor’s hand in the process.

Yuri looked back over at Victor the second the poodle had bounded off into the sparse bushes that bordered the winding trail they’d been walking down. The prince was looking after his dog with an expression on his face that almost looked wistful if Yuri cared to try and categorize it.

“Is everything okay?” Yuri asked, punctuating the question with a gentle squeeze to Victor’s hand.

“Everything’s fine. Well, Everything’s mostly fine. I’m just annoyed that I have to drop in on your dance time in order for us to get a true moment alone.” Victor’s smile widened some as he looked back at Yuri and some of the strange thoughtfulness was gone from his features. “Although, I have to say that I’m not sad about any chance to get to watch you. I love watching you dance. I haven’t had nearly enough opportunities to do so, but I would never want to interrupt any time you might want to keep for yourself.”
“You know I wouldn’t invite you if I didn’t want you there and half the time Phichit ends up following me anyway, so I’m not often out there completely alone in any case.” Yuri shrugged and gave in to the urge to lean against the prince’s side. “Although, I’m very sure he’d leave us alone if we asked him nicely.”

“I’m very sure he would pretend to leave us alone and then spy on us.” Victor pointed out and Yuri groaned because he was one hundred percent right.

“Well, at least that means we’ll technically have a chaperone still.” Yuri sighed and watched the fog of his breath as it dissipated into the air. “Not that he’d be a particularly good one…”

“At this point, I would have to say the worse the better.” Victor stated simply as he untangled his hand from Yuri’s in favor of wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him closer instead. “I’m certainly not going to complain if he doesn’t feel the need to clear his throat or scrape the legs of his chair against the floor every time we get closer than a few meters to each other.”

“Oh no, it would be much worse than that. He’ll just sit there silently and creepily, and possibly even take pictures to use for blackmail later.” Yuri reached out with his free hand and gave Makkachin a gentle tap on his rump as the poodle sped past with his ears up and his ball in his mouth. “Something tells me not even threatening to charge him with treason would stop him.”

“We can cross that bridge when we get to it.” Victor assured him with a lot more confidence than Yuri was feeling about their odds of avoiding Phichit’s well-meant spying. Maybe Victor just hadn’t spent enough time with the other man to truly understand Yuri’s trepidation that Phichit could ever be contained. “I could always convince Chris to come up with something to distract him. Chris is good at that and he owes me a few favors. Not to mention he wouldn’t find it a hardship at all.”

“So, it that an actual thing or…?” Yuri glanced up at Victor grinning down at him. “What? That’s the one thing Phichit doesn’t feel the need to overshare with me. I’m not even really sure if I’m thankful about not having to hear hour long monologues about it or not…”

“Well, I don’t know about Phichit, you’re right about him playing his cards surprisingly close to the vest for once, but it is definitely a thing for Chris. Not sure how deep it runs, but it’s at least a crush.” Some of Victor’s good cheer seemed to fade at that. “The rules around this whole Selection business means there’s not much either of them can do about it no matter what the case may be.”

“It’s not going to be forever, though.” Yuri was quick to point out, but not missing the brief flash of
pleased surprise in Victor’s eyes that for once he was the one to bring up their rapidly approaching deadline in a positive manner instead of skirting around it ambivalently. “Unless you marry Chris, of course. I guess that could put a damper on any other developing relationships.”

“Yuri!” Victor’s pout caused Yuri to giggle in response to how over the top it was, but there was something there on the edge of his expression that made Yuri almost pause. Something distinctly vulnerable that Yuri wasn’t used to seeing there. “You wouldn’t really let Chris steal me away, would you?”

“I wouldn’t exactly go without a fight, but…” And there Yuri did pause as he tried to sort through where his own thoughts had suddenly gone haywire as he desperately tried to parse out some kind of meaning to what he’d seen reflected in Victor’s blue eyes. “But, well, you’re the one that’s ultimately doing the choosing. I can’t exactly pick for you.”

For a moment, Victor looked almost surprised, like that thought hadn’t ever really occurred to him before. Like he’d never actually considered the fact that he was the one making the final choice in the whole game.

Which was a completely and utterly ridiculous thing to think, but it was the only thing Yuri’s startled brain could come up with.

“You know what? You’re right. I am the one who gets to choose.” Victor sounded almost pleased with himself as he bent over in order to press a quick kiss against Yuri’s cold cheek.

“Oh, I knew, but I didn’t know, you know?” Yuri absolutely did not know. He didn’t have a single clue what Victor was trying to get at, but the prince looked so happy in that moment he didn’t want to risk ruining the mood, so he nodded anyway. “Perfect. Unfortunately, I’m freezing and pretty sure either Minako or another attendant is going to come looking for us soon, so we might as well head back and warm up some before our afternoon meetings start.”

“Oh, I knew, but I didn’t know, you know?” Yuri absolutely did not know. He didn’t have a single clue what Victor was trying to get at, but the prince looked so happy in that moment he didn’t want to risk ruining the mood, so he nodded anyway. “Perfect. Unfortunately, I’m freezing and pretty sure either Minako or another attendant is going to come looking for us soon, so we might as well head back and warm up some before our afternoon meetings start.”

“Now that’s something I definitely don’t want to do.” Now it was Yuri’s turn to pout. Victor wasn’t wrong. It was cold, Yuri in particular felt frozen through to the core, and he was sure someone was going to come for them soon in an effort to make sure they weren’t late… For that moment, though, he really didn’t care.
Spending time with Victor whenever he could, for however long he could, would always be more important.

Any other time and that thought might have cause him to feel a spike of anxiety, but this time it didn’t. It was hard to feel anything other than warm and loved, tucked up against Victor’s side as he was with the prince’s attention on him and him alone.

Somewhere in the palace there were people waiting for them and duties that needed to be performed. Somewhere out in the garden was a camera crew following them at a discreet distance trying to catch good footage for broadcast. They weren’t alone and they couldn’t stay out there forever, but Yuri didn’t care.

Right then they might as well have been the only two people in the entire universe.

Like that, it was so easy to push everything else out of his mind. Dancing, any worries about his future, the looming meetings and broadcasts and paperwork and other things that were waiting for him… Well, they just didn’t matter.

Yuri knew that as soon as they went their separate ways everything that now seemed so far away and insignificant would come crashing back down on him and leave him lost and confused again, but for this moment everything felt so clear.

That clarity never lasted long enough for Yuri to convince himself to throw all caution to the wind, but it was like a breath of fresh air cutting through the clustered and fevered nooks and crannies of his brain. He savored any moment where he could push the pause button on his anxiety and insecurities.

It was in moments like this that Yuri felt so sure this was exactly where he wanted to be.

Now if only he could hold onto that certainty for more than ten minutes at a time…

~

Life became much busier in the next week and November began to wane and December loomed
ahead on the horizon. Busy enough that the first thing Yuri had to cut was the time he could spend in the studio, much to the detriment of his own sanity.

It also didn’t help that Yuri had been made aware that they were fast approaching the date when more of his friends were going to pack their bags and return home.

“We’re going to miss you.” Phichit had probably said that a bare minimum of fifteen times since they had both followed Leo back to his room ten minutes after dinner had ended and they’d been released for the evening.

“I’m starting to regret telling you we’re leaving in the first place. If you get either Guang Hong or I in trouble for running your mouth when you aren’t even supposed to know anything yet, I’m going to kill you.” Leo grumbled from where he was going through his drawers in an effort to sort out all off his summer clothes to get a jump start on his packing. “And it’s not like we’re leaving tomorrow. You’ve got another half a week with us yet.”

“That’s nowhere near long enough. I’m filing a protest.” Phichit threw his arms up in the air and landed on Leo’s bed with a loud huff and an overexaggerated bounce. “Yuri! Get Victor! I’d like to file a formal complaint.”

“I’m not going to do that.” Yuri stated blandly.

“Stop trying to get Yuri to do your dirty work for you.” Leo chucked a pair of rolled up socks at Phichit’s head to punctuate that statement. “And complaining to Victor isn’t going to do anything anyway. It was our idea to go, not his. He practically begged us to stay until the Winter Festival was done.”

“Which you totally should do.” Phichit pressed as he threw Leo’s socks right back at him. “Be honest. You just did it this way so you could avoid having to do any more work.”

“Can you blame him?” Yuri asked, more to stop any other potential projectiles from being thrown than anything else. Leo’s right hand was conspicuously resting on a heavy stack of books at the current moment and Yuri didn’t like his odds of not getting caught in the crossfire should those start flying around. “If I could think of a way out of it without having to go home myself, I’d jump on it.”

That was mostly an exaggeration. Yuri didn’t mind hard work and JJ really had a handle on the small details like decorations and what color font should be used on the programs which would have
driven Yuri insane. Aside from his existential crisis about having to eventually go back to the ballet where he was sure to run into his former coworkers and acquaintances that he wasn’t entirely sure he ever wanted to see again, Yuri had actually been starting to enjoy their planning sessions a little bit.

“Fair point, but that doesn’t mean he has to take Guang Hong with him.” Phichit stated, though the protest sounded weak even to Yuri’s ears. “Who else am I supposed to hang out with? JJ? Chris? Or, god forbid, Yuri?”

“I’m going to remember you said that the next time you’re banging on my door at ten at night complaining about being bored and begging for me to let you in.” Yuri tried look as stern as possible, but he cracked as soon as Phichit rolled his eyes with a loud huff. They both knew Yuri ever ignoring Phichit was an empty threat, if only because Phichit was annoyingly persistent. “Fine. Don’t believe me. All I have to do is set Minako and on you and you’ll wind up regretting you were ever born. She’d do anything to make sure I go to bed early enough to make it easier to get me moving in the morning.”

“I’d watch yourself, Phichit. Yuri’s attendant is honestly one of the most terrifying people I’ve ever met.” Leo stated, and Yuri couldn’t help but notice as the other man shivered slightly and glanced around for a split second as though scared even speaking about Minako in vague terms would be enough to cause her to suddenly appear.

“Hmmm… You’re right.” Phichit acted like he was deep in thought for a moment. “You really do have a formidable guard dog there, Yuri. My attendants are super nice, and they do tolerate my shenanigans better than expected, so I wouldn’t trade them off… But they certainly don’t seem to have as much of a stake in making sure I’m well-rested and on time like Minako does with you.”

“I don’t understand why that should confuse you. If I sent Minako on grand hamster hunts twice a week or misplaced my shoes as often as you somehow manage to do, she wouldn’t be nearly as invested in making sure I get to breakfast on time either.” Yuri had been standing by the open door of Leo’s room, and he moved a little further inside in order to take up a spot leaning against the wall by Leo’s already half-empty bookshelf.

“Yuri does have a point there. You left your shoes in the garden once this week already.” Leo had stopped his sorting for a moment and was more focused on Phichit. “How did that even happen? It’s been freezing for the past few days. Like to the point where they’ve been saying we might get snow soon. That kind of freezing.”

“That is for me to know and you to never find out.” Phichit stated firmly, and, even though Yuri was actually pretty curious about that as well, he let the subject drop. While rare, when Phichit got bristly and defensive about something it was always a good idea to let him change the subject instead of risking him hitting right back with something gleaned from his efforts at canvassing the palace gossip.
“Okay, to be serious for a moment, we’re all going to miss you… And Guang Hong, too. Speaking of, where is he? How am I supposed to give him my heartfelt goodbyes if he’s not here to receive them?”

Phichit didn’t even wait for an answer to his, apparently rhetorical, question. He launched himself up off of Leo’s bed and bolted out of the room without another word.

“Well, he’s got a lot of energy tonight.” Yuri observed mildly.

“He’s got a lot of energy every night. And every morning. And throughout the duration of the day.” Leo paused for a moment of silent contemplation. “So, always, then. He always has too much energy for a reasonable human being.”

“You’re not wrong.” Yuri conceded that point easily enough. “How long do you think it’s going to take for him to get Guang Hong in here?”

“I’d give him about five to ten minutes. He doesn’t seem like it, but Guang Hong can be very determined when he’d focusing on something. I don’t think Phichit’s going to be able to pull him away from his packing as easily as he thinks he will.” Leo hesitated for a moment and then placed the sweater he’d been folding off to the side and turned his full focus to Yuri. “Do you ever still get the feeling that this entire thing has been some kind of long-term fever dream?”

“Honestly?” Yuri asked and raised an eyebrow as Leo nodded. “All the damn time. I doubt I’ll ever be convinced any of this really happened. I never would have guessed that something like this would ever happen to me, even if I had a million years to consider it.”

“I know what you mean, but I’ll bet it’s definitely worse for you.” Leo pointed out, far more seriously than Yuri had anticipated. It was enough that Yuri straightened up some instinctively. “I know they gave us all the same ‘anything can happen’ spiel before we came here, but who could ever really predict who would make it this far?”

“Not me. I still can’t quite believe I was even Selected in the first place. I was pretty convinced that was the part that was never going to happen, so I haven’t actually planned for literally any of this.” That bit was easy enough to admit. It wasn’t anything he hadn’t already thought to himself over and over again every night as he tried to quiet his mind enough to fall asleep. He’d probably go to his grave still wondering about the odd twist of fate that had led to his inclusion in Victor’s Selection. “Nothing has been at all what I expected… Not that I really expected much to begin with.”
“Whatever you did, you definitely did it right.” For a moment, it looked like Leo was going to go on and follow up on that thought, but he didn’t. Instead, he let out a quiet gasp and strode across the room towards his closet. “Shit. I can’t believe I almost forgot.”

“F-forgot what?” Yuri had no idea what Leo could have forgotten or what it had to do with him, but whatever it was, it was apparently hidden in the closet.

“This!” Leo exclaimed proudly as he pulled out a small box wrapped in blue and silver paper. “Your birthday present! Since we’ll be gone a few days before your actual birthday, I figured I might as well give it to you now.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything.” Yuri protested even as he accepted the package from his friend. He bobbled it for a second as Leo had been particularly enthusiastic about shoving it at him, but he managed to get a good grip in time to prevent a fall. “Really, Leo. You didn’t.”

“I know, but I wanted to. You’ve been a huge help the whole time I’ve been here. You know, with the dancing lessons and being totally cool when I freaked out about talking on live TV and stuff. You didn’t have to do any of that, but you did.” Leo offered up a shy grin. “I’ve also included my address and our home phone on the card so we can keep in touch. Um, if you wanted to keep in touch, that is…”

“Of course, I want to keep in touch!” Yuri pulled the card from off the top of the gift and reverently placed it into his sweater pocket as Leo had looked like he was about to nervously reach out to try and take it back. “And you don’t have to thank me for anything. I was more than happy to do whatever I could. It wasn’t any trouble at all.”

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t mean you had to do it.” Leo didn’t seem to want to back down at all. “Other people wouldn’t have cared if we fell flat on our faces. In fact, they might have preferred it if we embarrassed ourselves in front of everyone.”

“Well, there’s a reason those other people aren’t here anymore. There’s no point in being a jerk for the sake of being a jerk.” As much as he wished it wasn’t true, Yuri knew from personal experience that Leo had a point. Just because he’d put it behind him didn’t mean he’d forgotten about the isolation, spreading of rumors, and even outright sabotage he’d been put through his first few months at the palace. “Thank you, too. For the present and for helping to keep me sane. Without you guys I probably would have run out of here screaming the first week.”

“Not a problem.” Leo grinned and made a motion towards the gift. “Open it. I don’t want to wait until your actual birthday to see if you like it… Basically since it’ll take more than that for your
mailed thank you to make it to me.”

Yuri laughed and turned the box over gently in his hands until he found the seams in the wrapping paper. “I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m sure I’m going to love it.”

He unwrapped the package carefully and dropped the paper in the waste bin beside Leo’s desk. From there he lifted the tab keeping it closed and raised the lid. Inside, nestled in a bed of wispy cotton, was what looked like some kind of electronic storage device.

“It’s a portable drive.” Leo must have seen Yuri’s confusion as he immediately jumped to explain. “I had my family send it from home. My friends and I use it to store our shared music collection. I’m going to need the drive back once you’re done because it was kind of expensive, but I thought you might like to expand your own collection some. I couldn’t help but notice there was still a ton of space on your music player when you were helping us practice for the ball, so I had everyone from home add their favorites and I updated some of mine when it got here.”

“Wow… Leo, it’s perfect.” Yuri never had been one for physical displays of affection, but he couldn’t stop himself from giving his friend a firm, if brief, hug of gratitude. “Thank you so much. I’m always looking for new music. I can upload the files tonight and give this back to you in the morning?”

Leo definitely looked pleased with himself as he nodded in response to Yuri’s question. “I’m glad you like it. It was the least I could do for everything you’ve done for me while I’ve been here. I also wanted to make sure you had something to remember us by, too. I know you’ve got Victor to keep you company, but if you ever feel lonely around here, don’t forget about the rest of us.”

“You say that as if there is even the smallest of chances that I could forget about any of you.” Yuri stated firmly. It almost surprised him with how much he meant it, though he supposed it probably shouldn’t. Over the space of the past almost seven months he’d spent more time with his friends than even with Victor over all and that was a connection he was suddenly desperate not to lose. “I-I can’t say for sure that I know what’s going to happen even a month from now, but I do know that you and Guang Hong and Chris and Phichit and everyone else in the Elite are still going to be my friends. We’ll find ways to stay in touch and visit and do all of those other things Phichit always goes on about.”

“Definitely.” Leo agreed with a bright grin and a firm open-handed thump right between Yuri’s shoulder blades.

They weren’t given long to bask in the moment of friendly solidarity as Phichit returned with much
fanfare and a grumbling Guang Hong drug behind in his wake.

It was a bittersweet evening altogether.

Once Guang Hong had seen that Leo had given Yuri his present, he’d run back to his room to get his own, gifting Yuri with a handmade photo album filled with pictures Phichit had provided him. That had led to a full-blown walk down memory lane.

Yuri might have been no closer to truly making a decision about his own future, but he did know he was going miss Leo and Guang Hong considerably more than anyone else who had left so far.

Yuri had a harder time than usual sleeping that night.

~

Both Leo and Guang Hong had agreed to be formerly dismissed that Friday on the live airing of *The Report* and afterward there had been a small farewell dinner before they’d met up with their baggage in the main foyer and got into the town cars that would take them to the airport.

It was a predictably a somber affair and even two days later they were all still feeling some of the sting of their friend’s departures despite the palace staff’s best attempts at keeping them busier than ever.

Some residual melancholy spilled over onto the morning of Yuri’s birthday, though it was quickly dispersed with Victor’s bright declaration that all their responsibilities had been canceled for the day so they could properly celebrate. Even with the two cameras that hovered on the periphery the whole morning, Yuri found himself enjoying every minute of spending time with Victor, Yurio, Chloe, and the remaining Elite as they spent the morning playing games in the Entertaining Room and the afternoon watching movies in the theater in the basement.

Yuri never had been great with being the constant center of attention, and by the time dinner had ended he started to feel that weird buzzing he would get at the base of his skull when he was starting to hit his limit for interacting with other human beings. He excused himself from his friends and, after exchanging several birthday kisses with Victor in an out of the way hallway towards the back of the palace, he ended up making his way to the dance studio.
Finally alone, he stretched to the strains of some of the new music Leo had given him. It turned out he and his friends had varied, but excellent, tastes, and there were even more tracks he couldn’t wait to dance to. Even though most were from genres the ballet would have turned their noses up at.

That was one thing about the National Ballet that he didn’t miss, Yuri thought to himself as he worked his way through a few upbeat turns set to the beat of a quick bass line on a song Yuri classified as an interesting mix between rock and a traditional orchestral arrangement. He could almost imagine an entire performance in his head spanning over the entire album. Something melodramatic, but still somehow almost soft and wistful to tie in the sweeping woodwinds to the thud of the drums and almost frenetic strings.

It made him think of heroic epics and a tale of love once lost and then found. The kind of legend filled with magic and adversity and tasks completed to win the hand of a fair maiden. He could feel the twists and turns the narrative would take, the dark dips and shining highs…

It would have been an interesting story to tell if he could find a way to iron out the rough spots and wobbly transitions… Maybe if he re-arranged the tracks some in order to split the pacing better…

He was deep in thought about that as he ran through a few jumps to get his heart rate up, so much so that he didn’t immediately register the door had been opened and someone had entered the studio until he heard the distinctive sounds of a person clapping in the brief break between songs.

Yuri glanced up into the mirror to find Chloe standing in the doorway clapping awkwardly with her free hand against the wrist of the hand that was holding something small and black in her closed fist.

“Wow!” Chloe stopped clapping, but maintained her blindingly bright grin as Yuri quickly moved across the room to pause his music so they would be able to better hear each other. “How do you jump so high?”

“Literal decades of practice and training. I used to be able to jump higher, but I’m still kind of out of practice.” Yuri grumbled out the last bit, though Chloe didn’t seem to notice the subtle dip in mood. The fact of the matter was that he couldn’t spend ten hours a day either in a studio or on a stage any longer and, unless that were to change, he probably would never get the same height he used to be able to get with his jumps… But he definitely didn’t want to dwell on that at the moment…

“Anyway… What’s up? Did you need me for something?”

“Yes. I need to give you your present. Your real present. Not that book on the history of Britannia Mother made me give you.” Chloe rolled her eyes at that before brightening up again as she held out what Yuri could now tell was a mobile phone for him to take. “Feel free to throw the book away, or
burn it, or whatever, but I’ve got your family on the phone and they’d like a chance to give you their own birthday wishes.”

Yuri felt butterflies burst to life in the pit of his stomach and he almost tripped over himself as he scrambled across the room.

He hadn’t had a lot of hope that he would be allowed to either receive or place a call to his family. There had been a few Selected who’d had birthdays while at the palace and they had all been made to content themselves with letter or pre-recorded messages. He knew Victor would have made it happen if Yuri had asked him, but he hadn’t been able to bring himself to make the request.

“Thank you!” Yuri took the offered phone with only a minimum of fumbling on his part. “Thank you so much…”

“No need to thank me. Honestly. I also find it mind-numbingly ridiculous they won’t let you talk to your own families whenever you want. It’s not like they even let you know state secrets for you to be in danger of accidentally leaking some.” Chloe sighed and shrugged as she turned towards the door. “Anyway… Have fun. You can drop the phone off in my room when you’re done. If I’m not there one of my attendants should be hanging around and they’ll make sure I get it.”

“Of course. Thanks again.” Yuri smiled warmly and waved as Chloe took her leave. As soon as the door closed firmly behind her, he held the phone up to his ear. “Hello?”

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, YURI!”

Yuri instantly moved the phone to arm’s length away from his face as the triplets launched into a high-pitched rendition of the birthday song. The second they were through and he deemed it safe, he pressed the speaker back against his ear, not trying at all to stem his enthusiastic laughter as the triplets giggled at him through the phone.

“Hello, girls.” Yuri moved away from the door and back further into the room, angling his body away from the wall of windows as he did so. “Thank you for the song. Are you sure you don’t want to trade your dance lessons for singing lessons? You girls could be onto something here…”

“Yuri! Stop giving them ideas!” Mari’s voice came in clear over the excited exclamations of the girls in the background. “There is not a single person in this family that needs to take voice lessons and you know it.”
“Just because you make babies cry and small woodland creatures flee with your voice doesn’t mean the rest of us will.” Yuri laughed harder as his sister muttered something he couldn’t quite understand, but that sounded particularly unsavory under her breath.

“I don’t have to take this from you… Here. Mom and Dad want to talk to you.” There was the sound of rustling as the phone changed hands.

“Yuri!” As Yuri heard his mother’s voice he suddenly had to fight back the sting of tears from gathering in the corner of his eyes. “Happy birthday, son!”

“Thanks, Mom.” Yuri paused as his dad offered his own birthday wishes. “And thanks, Dad. How have you been? I’ve missed you.”

“We’ve been fine. No need to worry about us.” Yuri’s mother brushed off his concern as easily as she always did. “We miss you, too. Surely you’ll be able to call us more often or even come visit in the future, right?”

That was an excellent question and one Yuri wasn’t entirely sure how to answer. Factually, he knew that once the Selection was over he would have a lot more freedom. They’d been given that speech by Celestino once they’d reached the Elite. As Victor’s spouse he’d have his own encrypted mobile phone and he’d be allowed to make more or less independent decisions about trips and other excursions… Up to a point, at least.

But how was he supposed to tell his parents that those rules wouldn’t matter if he went back to the ballet? They didn’t even know that was an option and a large part of Yuri wasn’t even sure he wanted them to know.

“I’m sure I will, Mom.” Yuri said instead. It would be true in either case, at least. Even without marrying Victor, as a Three he was sure to make more than enough to take the trips back home he hadn’t been able to afford the last time he’d been employed by the National Ballet and if he did end up married to the prince… Well, money certainly wouldn’t be any kind of object then either. “And… And, um, you’ll be back here for Christmas?”

“That seems to be the plan.” Yuri’s father answered. “A young man came by just the other day to iron out the travel details. Oh, but I don’t think we’re supposed to tell you about all that. Sounds like they’d prefer for it to be another surprise.”
“Of course. Well, if anyone notices, I’ll make sure to tell them I didn’t hear anything from you.”

He spent a few more minutes going back and forth with his parents, exchanging small stories about their lives that had been left out of the steady stream of letters they sent to each other. With a final reminder from him for them to pass on his greetings to Yuko and Takeshi, and a reminder from his parents to pass on their own greetings to Victor, the phone was passed back to the triplets.

About five minutes, and at least one burst ear drum on Yuri’s part later, the phone cycled back to Mari once more.

“Hey, bro. Happy birthday.” Yuri thanked her quietly and then, after a brief pause in which Yuri was sure his sister was making sure she had the kitchen where their home phone was located all to herself without any prying ears, she went on. “Can you believe they wouldn’t let you call us on your birthday? If it weren’t for Chloe we wouldn’t have gotten to speak with you at all!”

“Yeah, it’s stupid. I think it wouldn’t be so bad if there hadn’t been that whole leaked pictures thing before. According to Victor, it made the powers that be really tighten up on security around the rest of us to make sure nothing else ‘slips’ out, even by mistake.” Yuri shuffled around for a second and adjusted his grip on the phone, a sudden spike of curiosity pushing him to ask a question that had been on his mind for some time at that point. “So… You have the private phone number of one of the princesses of Britannia, huh? How’d that happen?”

“Oh, that? That, um… Hang on a second.” There was a long pause where Yuri heard hushed voices and what sounded a lot like someone climbing a long flight of stairs and then closing a door behind them once they got to the top. “Sorry about that. The triplets have like supersonic hearing when it comes to sniffing out gossip. Are you still there, Yuri?”

“I’m still here.” Yuri provided, though he wasn’t quite able to keep a note of confusion out of his tone at his sister’s strange antics. “Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine. I just had to go up to the attic to make sure the triplets don’t have any way to accidentally on purpose overhear. They aren’t exactly the most discrete and there’s only so much Mom and Dad can do to distract them if I’m standing in the kitchen.” Mari let out a tight sigh. “They still don’t exactly have that little filter that helps them understand which secrets needs to stay secrets fully functioning yet.”

“I’m pretty sure the cord on the kitchen phone doesn’t reach all the way up into the attic.” Mari’s
response hadn’t exactly cleared up any of his confusion. If anything, it had only added to it. “Mari, what aren’t you telling me?”

“It’s nothing. You need to understand that, okay? Don’t try and read too much into any of it.” Mari paused and refused to speak until Yuri had sighed and agreed to remain completely impartial. “She gave me a mobile phone before we left last time. Something about it being easier to communicate with it than letters and not having to risk going through the palace switchboards… Apparently, she doesn’t have a lot of Illéan friends who aren’t Victor, so this is like a fun outlet for when she gets bored. I’m also fairly convinced Victor’s using her to get interesting stories about you, too. We talk about you a lot…”

Mari trailed off there for a moment and Yuri’s mind continued to whir through the silence. He couldn’t say he had a normal sibling relationship with his sister. Time away and physical distance for the past five years had done that, but they had still always been close in their own way and Yuri liked to think he knew her better than anyone else.

That, and they were much more alike than they appeared on the surface. Enough so Yuri could hear what Mari wasn’t saying as much as what she was.

“Being friends with royalty is really weird, huh?” Yuri offered up casually.

Mari let out a gruff chuckle, and Yuri could swear he sensed her relax just a little. “You’re not kidding… Although, you seem to have finally managed to adjust some.”

“They wear you down after a while.” Yuri let out a soft sigh that bordered on something almost fond. “But you never completely get used to it, I think. It’s like… It’s like they have their own corner of the world and, no matter how much time you spend there with them, you always somehow still feel like you’re just visiting. Like as soon as you turn around all of that is going to crumble away and you’re back in the real world where you started.”

“You are not in any way exaggerating, little bro.” This time Mari’s laughter was less gruff and more clear. “Sorry for not giving you a head’s up about all of this before we left, but I honestly couldn’t quite believe it was even happening. I mean, what are you supposed to do when a princess slips you a phone and tells you to hold onto it because it would be a shame to miss out on a friendship because of a silly thing like distance or socioeconomic roles? Who even talks like that anymore?”

“Chloe. Chloe definitely talks exactly like that. I’m not entirely sure if that’s just a ‘her’ thing or a
royalty in general thing, though Victor kind of talks like that sometimes, too… Particularly when he’s being dramatic.” Yuri couldn’t have stopped the fond smile that spread across his lips then if he’d wanted to. “Well, it’s not necessarily a bad thing to be friends with a princess.”

“I guess you would be the one to know.” He didn’t have to be in he same room as his sister to know she would be shaking her head and giving Yuri that little half-smirk she favored when she was particularly amused by something. There was a beat of silence and when Mari spoke again her tone was more serious. “You’re really going to marry him, aren’t you?”

There was the million dollar question.

“Mari… If you had asked me that two weeks ago, I’m sure I would have said ‘yes’ without any hesitation, but now…” Yuri trailed off for a moment as he hunched his shoulders and curled in on himself. Yuri bit his bottom lip hard enough that he wouldn’t have been surprised to taste blood as he waited for Mari to say something in response.

After an endless moment that drug out so long Yuri had started to panic some, Mari cleared her throat and spoke.

“Yuri…” He could hear Mari take a deep breath even with all the many kilometers between them and he knew should would be choosing her words carefully. “Did… Did something happen? Did Victor…? He didn’t…”

“Oh! No! No, Victor didn’t do anything. He wouldn’t. I didn’t think about how bad that would sound when said that way… It’s not… It doesn’t have anything to do with Victor. Not really.” Yuri tried to breathe deeply in order to calm down some. “It’s just… I had an appointment with the palace doctor about two weeks ago and… Well, they had done some more tests when I first got here and he’d gotten some responses from some other doctors and… Mari, the ballet’s doctor was wrong. My knee is fine. It’s healed. Completely. I can… That is to say, I could dance again if I wanted to. No restrictions… But I can’t if I stay here. There’s no way they would allow that.”

“No, I guess they wouldn’t.” Mari sounded as though she were deep in thought and Yuri waited with bated breath to see what her answer might be. His sister’s no-nonsense attitude had helped guide him on more than one occasion, and he hoped this might be another one. “Sounds like you’ve got one hell of a decision to make.”

“That’s an understatement.” Yuri grumbled. “I don’t know what to do, Mari. No matter what I decide I’m going to be giving up something very important to me. I’ve already lost dancing once… I don’t know if I’m going to be able to let it go again…”
“Are you willing to let Victor go instead?” Mari asked. She never had been one to beat around the bush or hide behind carefully crafted sentiments. Well, Yuri had known before he opened his mouth that all he was going to get out of her was blunt honesty. It had been kind of what he’d been looking for, so there was no point in being upset with her now that he had it. “If you have to let go of something, which one is going to hurt the most? Which one is the one you can’t live without?”

“I don’t know… Both.” That was about as far as he’d gotten on his own. “I know, I know. That’s a stupid answer.”

“No, it’s not. Don’t put words in my mouth.” Mari cut him off abruptly before he could even get going. “It’s not stupid to love more than one thing in your life, but that still doesn’t mean you aren’t going to have to make some kind of decision. Look, Yuri, you know we’re going to be here for you no matter what, but the only person who can decide which path to choose, is you. I can’t do it for you and I wouldn’t even if I could.”

“I know…” Yuri held back a tight sigh. He hadn’t really expected Mari to make the choice for him, that wasn’t who she was, but there had been a small part of him that had still hoped she would. “I just wish I had some idea of what the right choice is.”

“I’m not sure there is a ‘right’ choice per se. I can see you happy both ways, but that doesn’t mean it’s going to be easy or that it’s not going to hurt at first. No matter what you choose, I think we both know it’s going to hurt like a bitch.” Mari made a soft noise then, not quite a sigh, but close to it. “Maybe the person you should really be having this conversation with is Victor. I’m pretty sure I already know the answer, but have you mentioned any of this to him?”

“No…” Yuri was hesitant to admit that out loud as he knew exactly the kind of response he was going to get out of his sister for that admission. He could almost feel her roll her eyes at him even with almost the entire country between them. “I don’t want to bother him with this…”

“Oh, Yuri…” This time the noise Mari made was definitely a sigh. An exasperated one. “You have always been so independent, but it’s not just about you anymore. If you want to have any hope at a good relationship with Victor, you have to recognize that you aren’t on your own anymore. He gets to be a part of the discussion, too, whether you want him to be or not.”

He knew that. Of course, he did. Logically, he was very much aware of the fact that Victor deserved to at least be present in the conversation. Even Yuri wasn’t oblivious enough not to realize that whatever he decided affected Victor just as much as it affected himself.
Mari was right. There were two people involved here and Yuri didn’t have any right to shut the other party out and do all the deciding on his own when it was more than just his own broken heart at stake.

But knowing and doing were two completely different things…

“What if he tells me to go?” Yuri had barely been able to whisper the question, almost as though saying it out loud in any capacity might have the power to instantly summon Victor to tell him to pack his bags right then and there. It was an irrational fear, but his anxiety had never been exactly rational before. There was no reason to think it would start to be now. “I don’t think… I don’t want him to tell me to leave…”

Yuri screwed his eyes shut and dug his nails into the palm of his hand as his head spun and it felt like each breath in was drug over heated shards of jagged glass.

“Yuri…” Mari still sounded a tad exasperated, but still somehow soft in her own way and Yuri let out a rush of air he hadn’t realized he’d been holding onto. “Do you love him? Really and truly? Be honest. Do you love him?”

Yuri blinked and then closed his eyes and took a few measured breaths as he steeled himself to say the one thing he’d never allowed himself to admit to anyone else.

“Yes.”

“Then I think you know exactly what you have to do.”

The worst part was that Yuri did know exactly what he had to do.

The only issue was actually getting up the courage to do it.
Decisions

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for how long this took to get posted. I swear this story will be finished, I hope within the next two weeks or so. Real life is a bummer, man.

Though, this is the longest chapter to date, so there's that! Lol.

A million thanks to everyone who has stuck with me so far. I can't begin to thank you all enough. We're almost there! I can see the finish line! ^_^

As much as the anxious part of his brain tried to convince him otherwise, Yuri knew his sister had been right. He had to talk to Victor about what had been bothering him for the past few weeks. It wasn’t a conversation he was looking forward to in any way, especially since his own thoughts on the matter were still completely muddled and opaque.

Maybe it was his own hesitance holding him back or, maybe for once, it really was their suddenly insane schedule coupled with the fact that it was practically impossible to get Victor alone without anyone hovering nearby and close enough that Yuri was paranoid they would overhear. In either case, Yuri never was able to find a time when he was truly alone with Victor as one day turned into two and then five, and, before he knew it, it was the day before the much-hyped Winter Festival.

Afterwards, Yuri swore to himself. After the festival was over, he was going to stomp and kick and scream if he had to in order to find the time to get Victor alone regardless of whether he’d been able to make heads or tails of his emotions by that point.

“Have you been having trouble sleeping again?” Yuri pulled himself out of his own head and met Minako’s concerned gaze in the mirror. She waited patiently until he shrugged in response, and she shook her head and let out a small huff of air through her nose. “You should have said something. You have a long weekend ahead of you. If you haven’t gotten enough rest it’s going to feel like torture.”

“It’s going to feel like torture anyway.” Yuri pointed out. They both knew he was much better at interacting with large crowds of strangers, but that still didn’t mean he felt completely comfortable with it and the next two days would be nothing but constant crowds and stimulation.

“Yes, but being exhausted is only going to turn it into a special kind of torture. Trust me, it’s not the kind you want to experience if you can help it.” Minako grabbed a tube of concealer from off the counter and Yuri forced himself to sit still as she applied it to the bags under his eyes. “I’m going to
bring you something to help you sleep tonight and you’re going to take it. You’ll thank me for it in the morning.”

“I know, I know.” As soon as Minako moved away Yuri blinked his eyes and took a deep breath. It didn’t help much to re-energize him, but he figured he’d only begin to feel a bit better once he’d had the chance to get some caffeine in his system. “What’s our schedule for today?”

“Busy.” Minako quipped as she moved on to fixing his hair. “You’ve got breakfast at eight, but it’s been shortened because you need to all be ready to get loaded into the cars to head to the ballet by eight forty-five. Once there, you’ll spend the morning setting up booths and decorations for the festival… There’s going to be cameras, of course, so no glasses for you. They have the lot of you set up for a meet-and-greet lunch thing at one. That’ll last until about two and you’ll be eating with the dancers and some high-level sponsors of the event. It’ll also be filmed and I’ve made sure to pack a list of talking points in your bag that you can go over on your way there to prepare.”

“Then, at two, the director is supposed to take the lot of you on a grand tour of the complex… The written schedule Mila gave me last night says that’s supposed to take a full hour, but who knows. In any case, once that’s done the children’s corps is supposed to put on a short dress rehearsal for you in the courtyard and then you’ll be brought back here to prepare for the live broadcast of *The Report* at five.” There Minako had to pause to finally take a breath.

“Tonight’s broadcast is supposed to be a three-hour special, right?” Yuri asked even though he already knew the answer and he cringed when Minako nodded. “I’m pretty sure we’re going to die today.”

“Perhaps. If it helps, I’ll be going with you, so if you need anything I’ll be within shouting distance I’m sure. Victor’s going to be there, too, so he’ll also be relatively accessible. I don’t know how he managed it, but he convinced King Yakov to give him the day to spend helping out with the festival set-up.” Minako ran her hands through Yuri’s bangs one last time before she took a step back and surveyed his appearance through the mirror. “After *The Report* will be dinner and then the king and queen have set aside an hour and a half for a meeting to go over tomorrow’s events one last time and then I would suggest you go straight to bed once they’ve released you.”

“By that time, I’ll probably be asleep and drooling on the conference table.” Yuri groused glumly as he removed his glasses and accepted the small case that held his contacts from Minako. “Thank you… By the way, do they often make you come on outings like this?”

“Not usually, but I suspect it has a lot to do with all the cameras that are going to be crawling around today and tomorrow. It’s not just going to be the palace crews. National and local news outfits will be present as well. I’d be willing to bet my salary that we’re being drug along to make sure you look picture perfect at all times.” Minako took back the empty case once Yuri was done and stuck it back
in the drawer where it belonged. “For once, I don’t actually mind it. I’ve always had a soft spot for
the ballet. I used to accompany Queen Lilia sometimes when Victor would give me an evening off.
I’ve always thought I would have made an exceptional ballerina in another life.”

There Minako’s smile turned almost sad for a brief moment. “But that’s a story for another time.
Right now, you have less than five minutes to finish getting dressed if you don’t want to be late for
breakfast. You definitely don’t want to miss that. You’re going to need all the sustenance you can get
if you want to make it through today with your wits about you.”

Even though he was intensely curious about Minako’s odd blip in her generally cheerful mood, Yuri
let the subject drop. Minako did have a valid point. The day was going to be long enough without an
empty stomach to keep him company so he finished what he needed to do quickly and stumbled out
into the hall a few minutes later.

Which was where he ran into JJ as they began to trudge towards the stairs together.

They both murmured polite greetings to each other, Yuri noting that the usually upbeat man seemed
a bit more subdued than usual. Although they had been spending a lot more time together recently
with the Elite only down to four members and their duties drawing them all close together, Yuri still
didn’t quite consider them close enough to make a comment about it.

JJ’s mood improved some as breakfast got underway and Yuri put his odd behavior out of his mind.
Most likely JJ was just as tired as the rest of them, if not more. The other man had been working very
hard trying to put this whole event together, perhaps harder than the rest of them if truth were told.

Besides, Yuri had ended up seated next to Victor for once, so he was more focused on that than
anything else.

“So, what did you have to do to get a pass to come with us today?” Yuri asked Victor once everyone
had gone through giving their good mornings and settling in. He could hear the beginning of quiet
conversations to either side of them, but nobody was trying to get their attention or paying them
much mind for the current moment.

“Trust me. You don’t want to know.” Victor replied with a grin and a wink. “But it’ll be worth it.
It’s been a long time since anyone’s let me be really hands on with an event and I’ll never regret
getting to spend any amount of time with you, no matter what form that time takes.”
“Agreed.” Yuri shared a quick smile of his own with the prince before he turned to start pulling together what he wanted to eat. “I am going to have to ask that you refrain from kidnapping me again, though. No matter how good of an idea it might seem at the time.”

“You know I can’t make a promise I’m not sure I can keep…” Victor tapped his index finger against his pursed lips and there was a sparkle in his blue eyes that made something in Yuri’s stomach flip over.

Yuri could tell the prince was mostly teasing, but he still couldn’t help but spend a split second considering the option.

Before Yuri could reboot his brain long enough to come up with a response, he’d been drawn into a conversation with Phichit, who was sitting to his other side and who had been trying to get Yuri to comment on the last-minute idea he had that involved probably a lot more sparkles and tinsel than anyone would really be comfortable with.

By the time Yuri had managed to transfer Phichit over to JJ, who was actually pretty onboard with the new decoration changes all thing considered, Victor was discussing the grueling schedule for the day with Chris and Chloe.

“It’s not an easy day, for sure, but it’s still not the worst I’ve been through.” Chloe grinned at Chris, who was in the middle of giving one of his more overblown pouts. “At least they penciled in times for us to eat. You’d be surprised at how often they forget that human beings, even royal ones, need food to continue to function.”

“They certainly didn’t want to waste time on something as insignificant as eating, but Mila threw a fit until the media advisors agreed to find a way to work in some meals into the schedule.” Victor tapped his fingers against the edge of his plate as he rolled his eyes. “She’s on been on staff for about a year now, but she’s been a godsend. Left on his own Celestino tended forget to pencil in time to feed us when we had days like this.”

“Be sure you note that for her yearly review. She deserves a raise by the sound of it.” Chris grabbed for the cream that was by Chloe’s elbow and poured some into his cup. “I’ll find a way to fund it if I have to.”

“I’ll be sure to take that into account when Father goes over the annual review for our staff. I’m assuming you’ll leave some financial information behind so we can pull it directly from your account?” Victor asked and both Chris and Chloe burst into laughter. “Mila will greatly appreciate it.”
“If she’s looking for better pay, I’ll bet we can put up a counteroffer that might tempt her to change sides.” Chloe giggled softly as Victor sent her a mock glare from across the table. “What? I’m always looking for administrative assistants that remember meal times. I think Mother has adjusted to running on nothing more than air and the occasional peppermint someone found in their handbag or pocket, but no one has ever bothered to teach me that skill.”

“Victor? How often does it happen where they forget to feed us?” Yuri couldn’t help but ask. He was mostly joking. After all, he was no stranger to long hours and either not getting an opportunity to eat or forgetting about it entirely, but there was a part of him that was still a bit serious. He knew he was either going to have to start cutting back on his intake at meals or find a way to hit the studio more often if he wanted to avoid having to ask Minako to let his clothes out, but the thought of having to suffer through a long day of interacting one on one with a long line of strangers on an empty stomach may have made him panic just a smidge.

“Presumably not as often as they used to.” Victor abandoned the slice of toast he was buttering in order to reach out and give Yuri’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “If they do forget, Yurio doesn’t usually allow them to get away with it for long. You know it’s been a successfully productive day when Yurio starts throwing furniture around while demanding a sandwich.”

“Is there any problem Yurio doesn’t solve by throwing furniture?” Chris asked, very pointedly ignoring the scorching glare aimed at him by the younger prince, who had perked up at the sound of his name.

“We’re still working on cultivating problem-solving skills that do not require the destruction of physical property. It’s been a difficult process, but I think we’ve made some significant progress.” As though to prove him wrong, Yurio used that opportunity to chuck a spoon that Victor elegantly ducked as soon as the words finished leaving his mouth. “See? Two months ago and that would have been the butter dish. Progress.”

“Keep fucking talking and it goddamn will be the butter dish. And the creamer, too.” To back up his threat, Yurio grabbed the small porcelain pitcher of cream that Chris had tried to subtly inch back towards himself. “Don’t fucking test me, old man. You know I’ll do it.”

“Are you coming with us today, Yurio?” Yuri asked, more to divert the conversation away from the potential of more flying cutlery than anything else.

“Yes. As if I’d let you losers get to spend time away from this hellhole without me.” Yuri sent a warning glare at where Chris looked like he was about to open his mouth in order to provoke Yurio further… Yuri had noticed the other man would get a wicked twinkle in his eyes when he was
getting ready to tease and he was sure Yurio had also noticed that by now. “Don’t say a fucking word, Giacometti. Nobody wants to listen to your bullshit today.”

“Come on now. I was merely going to say that I admire your industrious spirit. I never knew about your love of charitable giving and your latent abilities to hammer together vendor booths and stalls.” Chris didn’t look phased at all by the way Yurio was now looking like he was planning a murder, though Yuri couldn’t help but notice as Chris slid his chair just slightly out of Yurio’s arm length. “It’s a good thing to give back to the community. I’m proud of you for volunteering.”

“Just you fucking wait. You’ll get yours when you least expect it.” Yurio crossed his arms over his chest and proceeded to glare at every single person at the table in turn, even Phichit and JJ who were still deep in their own conversation and not paying any attention to the rest of them.

“Yuri, remind me to make sure the event organizers know not to give my little brother a hammer, power tools, or anything remotely sharp, okay?” Victor whispered into Yuri’s ear as Chloe had jumped in to make sure Chris was suddenly too occupied to push Yurio’s buttons any further. “I think all our lives might depend on it.”

“Please tell me Otabeck’s coming with us.” Yuri whispered back. If there was anyone who would stand a chance at making sure the younger prince didn’t accidentally or purposefully maim someone, Yuri’s money was on the young guard every time.

“If he wasn’t before, he definitely is now.” Victor muttered back and they both shared a knowing grin.

The rest of breakfast flew by in a flash after that. So much so that Yuri almost didn’t have enough time to get properly nervous. That didn’t happen until they were all loaded into the black town cars that were going to take them into town and to the ballet.

Luckily for him, he’d ended up in a car with Victor, Chris, and Phichit, all three of whom were perfectly fine carrying on a conversation more or less without him.

It also helped that neither Chris nor Phichit cared that Victor held his hand the entire trip there or that Yuri spent the majority of the ride plastered against the prince’s side. He would have been hard pressed to care even if they had, but it was nice to be able to get the physical comfort he needed from Victor without having to dodge sour looks or surprised glances.
He just had to make it through two days. Surely, he would be able to do that. Surely, everyone would be too busy to really pay much attention to him. It wasn’t like he’d been particularly popular throughout his time at the ballet. He’d been too introverted, too isolated. He’d kept his head down, done his job, and hadn’t spent more than the required bare minimum socializing.

Yuri wouldn’t have been surprised at all if most of the other dancers had barely noticed he’d gone in the first place. He doubted there would be many that would care either way to see him back, but he still couldn’t help worrying about it.

Well, that and worrying about he was going to feel to be back. The ballet had been his home for five years of his life. That wasn’t exactly something he was ever going to forget. He’d spent over a decade working until his joints ached and his feet bled to earn his place there and he had fought with all his strength to stay there once he’d made it.

He’d fought for everything he’d ever gotten. He’d scraped, scrimped, and worked until he felt like he was going to pass out from exertion, then he’d pushed himself just that tiniest bit more. There was always someone better there. Someone who was more graceful, who could jump higher, whose turns were more precise and whose lines were more technically correct, but Yuri had worked hard and pushed and pushed until he was past it all anyway.

It had all been worth it, or, at least, Yuri had thought it had been at the time. The things he had, what he’d accomplished, those things belonged to him and he’d loved every second of it. Dancing had been his life for a reason and he’d never regretted the decisions that had led him to the National Ballet the first time.

As he watched the familiar sloped roof of the theater come into view, some weird tangle of emotions settled in the pit of his stomach. It was more intense that what he’d expected it would be, enough to make his breath catch in his lungs, but still somehow much more different than he’d thought it would be.

The more he thought about it, the more he was almost convinced he was excited about returning to the ballet. Out of all the emotions he’d considered he might experience, excitement wasn’t one he’d thought he’d feel and he wasn’t entirely sure what he was supposed to do with that feeling now that it had shown up.

Yuri wasn’t given much time to think about it, however, as the cars were pulling up to the curb and he could see JJ, Minako, and some other attendants already stepping out of the one ahead of them.

Whatever the jumble of feelings resolved themselves into, it didn’t matter. They were here now.
Yuri somehow ended up paired with JJ as they were tasked with moving tables and chairs to be set up in areas that had been marked off with chalk lines sketching out where the booths were to be set up. That wasn’t as much of a hardship as it might have been in the past. JJ was laser-focused on their task and seemed to understand there was only so much boisterousness Yuri could handle at any one time.

As they both picked up opposite ends of a particularly long table, Yuri was almost surprised to find they had fallen into light, easy conversation.

“You seem to have a lot of experience with this kind of thing.” When JJ raised an eyebrow and sent a pointed look at the table they were carrying, Yuri laughed and elaborated. “Not the carrying heavy tables thing, although you don’t appear to be bad at that either. I was talking about planning a charity event.”

“Yeah. I do a lot of charity work back home. Usually my parents do a lot of the planning since they keep me pretty busy with photoshoots and commercials, but I’ve picked up a few tricks.” JJ paused for a moment as they had reached one of the areas designated for their table, and they worked together to turn it on its side and unfold the legs so it would stand properly. “I like giving back. I don’t get to use my fame for good nearly as often as I would like, but I help where I can, when I can.”
“How do you even have the time?” Yuri asked, truly curious to know the answer. Through the many stories JJ had told them about his whirlwind life before being brought here for the Selection, it hadn’t sounded like there was much spare time afforded to him.

“I’ve had more time lately, after my parents took over as my managers. The man I was using before really stacked up my paying gigs because those were the only events my contract allowed him to take a cut of.” JJ shrugged as they shifted the table so that it was better aligned with the chalk outline on the ground. “I have other problems with having parents for managers, but them caring about dipping into my profits isn’t one of them. They have plenty of their own money, and Mom and I both have a soft spot for children’s charities.”

“That’s… That’s really great. And you are good at it. Like really good.” Yuri meant every word of that, too. He even kind of wished he’d bothered to get to know the other man better earlier. Underneath his brash exterior and inherently competitive nature, there was a guy Yuri felt an almost familiar connection with.

After all, they did have a lot in common when Yuri really thought about it. They were both driven and goal oriented and competitive in their own ways. And they were also kind of impatient, and prone to making their own bullheaded decisions only to end up staying the cause out of sheer obstinacy. In fact, if JJ hadn’t put him off so much in the beginning by being an unfailing extrovert, Yuri was starting to think they probably could have been something more like friends than just comfortable acquaintances.

Besides, it wasn’t exactly JJ’s fault they had been brought together in order to go after the same prize, and, to be fair to him, he’d been much more pleasant over the past few weeks to everyone who was still left. He’d even stopped pushing to try and spend more one-on-one time with Victor, which appeased Yuri’s newly developed jealousy streak if nothing else.

“It’s not hard to be good at carrying around tables and chairs.” JJ joked good naturedly as they turned to go back to the central stack for another load. “Did they let you guys do this kind of thing often when you were here?”

“Sometimes. I mean, we never did anything like this with official royal sponsorship and involvement and everything, but we did a few things during our less busy times. Mostly small clinics in the summer for young Fives and we’ve let other charities use the facilities if we had the available space for them for their own things.” Yuri paused as they had to focus on swinging the table they were carrying to the left in order to avoid knocking into a stack of boxes that were swaying dangerously with a strong gust of winter wind. “Every fall we do a book drive for the library and some of us would volunteer to run donations to where they needed to go and we let the food bank do a food and blanket drive here right before winter every year, so like September-ish. Depends on when the
costumer director decides to clean out his storage room from our spring and summer productions and we have extra space before he moves in the gear for whatever is on our fall and winter docket.”

“Really? Hmmm…” JJ sounded thoughtful, but he waited until they’d placed new table in its spot before he continued. “I’ve worked with a charity here in Angeles before that tutors Sixes and Sevens in basic skills. Stuff like reading and basic math and they are always looking for new books or paper and pencils and stuff like that during the year. Do you think there might be some availability to do drop offs here? I’ll bet the ballet gets more foot traffic from potential donors than a single floor of an office building downtown.”

“That’s a really good idea.” They went through the motions of setting up the table and Yuri went on. “I’m sure they wouldn’t mind. You can ask the Assistant Director if we can find him. I’m sure he’ll make an appearance at lunch and he’d the one in charge of stuff like that… Is that… Um, is that a program specific to Angeles or…?”

“No, but it’s not national by any means. They have a branch in a few cities back home in Fellers, but nothing really outside of that to my knowledge.” JJ stopped walking and Yuri did the same. “Why? Do you think you know somewhere they could expand to? Mom’s been calling in favors, but she’s hit a wall with some of the other districts. No one seems to have the time to start something from the ground up and we’re too busy with my career and our other commitments to push too hard. We only managed to get something going here because I’m in town so often for work.”

“Yeah, I think I know someone who might be able to help you on the ground in Carolina…” Yuri paused for a moment while he internally debated about exactly how much he should really say. Eventually he decided that JJ sounded serious and that he genuinely wanted to help and was very committed to his cause. Certainly, far more than Yuri would have thought he would be if he was just doing the work for the sake of cultivating a good public image.

He even seemed really and truly excited at the prospect of being able to expand a program that, by all outward appearances, was important to him.

“Uh, well, my parents kind of do that in our town in their spare time. Dad’s a writer, so he’s pretty adamant about teaching anyone who wants to know to read. Plus, his schedule’s very flexible so he’s able to be available when schools and community centers wouldn’t be open, which helps with those who can’t afford to miss time from work.” Yuri shifted nervously back and forth.

Aside from Victor, he’d never told anyone about what his parents did, and, even then, he hadn’t gone into details. It wasn’t like there was anything illegal about what they were doing, but not everyone felt like the lower castes could or should go outside of official channels to educate themselves. Even though Yuri could tell that sentiment was slowly but surely changing, that didn’t mean most Twos and Threes would think it was the place of a Five to do the teaching.
“He’s also always been very business minded, so he can help them with budgeting and learning simple math... They might have some contacts they can put you in touch with, people they know who might volunteer... Especially if it’s something that’s already being done in other districts...” Yuri trailed off there and studied JJ’s face hesitantly while he waited for his reaction.

“That’s perfect!” In his excitement, JJ’s declaration came out as a loud shout. Yuri winced at the volume of it, but no one else looked like they were paying them any mind for the moment. “Can you give me their contact information when we get back? I want to send it to my parents and have them reach out as soon as possible.”

“Yeah, I can do that and I’ll let them know to expect a call.” Yuri was suddenly struck with another idea. “Why don’t you have them reach out to Emil, too? He was really interested in the new education project here in the library in Angeles... I’ll bet he would be interested in this also. Plus, he might have the contact information for more teachers around the country that could be interested as well.”

“That’s a great idea! I can’t believe I didn’t think of that sooner.” JJ shook his head and grinned widely. The thought suddenly struck Yuri that this was probably the most genuinely happy he’d ever seen JJ in all the months they’d lived in close quarters together. “Now I wish I thought to ask you about it months ago. I could have been working on it instead of twiddling my thumbs and staring at the ceiling when they didn’t have us stuck in lessons or meetings.”

“I don’t know how much help I am...” Yuri shrugged and shuffled his feet back and forth some. He was a little uncomfortable with taking any credit when all he’d really done was to think up a few names. It wasn’t like he even really knew the first thing about how to plan something like what JJ was talking about from the ground up. Hell, he’d pretty much only done the bare minimum of planning the event they were already at, finding himself more distracted than not whenever they had met about it.

“Don’t worry about it. Giving me new leads is plenty of help, and if you ever wanted to put in a good word for the organization every now and again in interviews and such, that would be even better!” JJ’s smile dimmed somewhat and he jolted as though he’d just remembered something. “Oh, I mean... You should only do that if you want to. Sorry. My mom gets on me all the time for assuming people will want to do what I say instead of asking them properly. I’m still working on that.”

“Don’t worry. You’re fine. I’m still not sure exactly what I’d be able to accomplish, but if I see any opportunities to help, I’ll do it.” What he was going to do exactly escaped him, but he felt like he had to make the promise anyway. Maybe he could ask Victor about it if he could ever find a spare second to talk to the prince alone. “I want to do it, so, really, please don’t think you’re pressuring me
JJ looked like he was about to say something further, but before he could get anything out the sound of Chris calling both their names across the open space of the courtyard caught their attentions.

“Hey! Yuri! JJ! If you guys have time to stand around, then you have time to come help us with these banners!” Yuri glanced across the way in the direction of Chris’ voice and found the tall man over by a pair of trees with a banner spread from his hands to Phichit’s and a ladder propped up against the tree next to them.

“I guess we should help them before they break something. Or stop them from breaking their own heads open.” Yuri stated and he saw JJ nod in agreement out of the corner of his eye.

After that, there wasn’t much time for talking as the four of them tried with varying degrees of success to get the massive banner firmly placed in the tree without anyone ending up with their skulls bashed against the cold pavement.

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Before Yuri knew it, almost half the day had passed in a blur.

“You gentlemen look like you’re enjoying yourselves.” Yuri glanced up from where he was sitting cross-legged on the ground with the other Elite as they were circled around a powerful space heater untangling massive strands of Christmas lights at the sound of Victor’s voice coming from above him.

“We are.” Yuri responded brightly as he shifted over so that there was more space between himself and Phichit. “Grab a strand and help us out.”

“Sure!” Victor chirped happily and plopped down to the ground right into the space Yuri had made for him. The prince eagerly grabbed a snarled pile of lights Phichit nudged his way. “Is this what they’ve been having you do the whole time?”

“No, we set up some booths earlier until Phichit almost brained some poor worker in the head with a hammer and JJ temporarily lost control of a power saw.” Yuri staunchly ignored the irritable grumbling from Phichit and the loud squawk from JJ in favor of stopping the cord of lights he was
currently working on from tangling around his foot for what felt like the eightieth time that day. “So, we’ve been relegated to tasks that are less likely to severely injure or kill ourselves or others.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m pretty sure these lights have tried to strangle me twice already.” Chris grumbled of his gave the strand in his hand an impotent tug. “I’m mildly concerned it was on purpose, too.”

“In your case, they probably are.” Phichit sniped back. “Payback for distracting me earlier so that we even have to do this job in the first place.”

“I thought we had agreed to blame JJ for our banishment. I get that the hammer thing was bad and all, but I didn’t have anything to do with JJ sawing that table in half.” Chris protested.

“No, but you didn’t stop me either. You knew that saw was a lot stronger than I thought it was. You were the one that was using it before me!” JJ frowned and threw an empty box of replacement bulbs that Chris nimbly dodged. “And no one was hurt. I don’t see why we had to be banished over here just because a table or two ended up broken… I did offer to replace it and the pot Phichit broke!”

“I get the feeling it was the principle of the matter, not necessarily because they didn’t have a way to recoup their destroyed property.” Yuri pointed out. In all honesty, Chris had made matters worse in his own way by causing a larger scene than strictly necessary and blocking a narrow walkway with his dramatics.

In fact, Yuri had been the only one that hadn’t been banished to light detangling duty, a fact he was quick to remind them of.

“Then you can just go back to building booths without us, Golden Boy.” Phichit teased back and topped it off with sticking his tongue out at Yuri for good measure. “It’s not like you’re making better progress with these cursed things than we are.”

“I think Yuri’s being a good friend. He didn’t have to come keep you company in your punishment.” Victor stated simply. Yuri glanced over to find the prince was already tangled up to the waist in his own strand of lights, and looking fairly content to be there, too. “Wow… This is harder than it looks…”

“That’s because you’re trying to untangle two completely different strands at once. Here.” Yuri dropped was he was doing and grabbed one end of the lights Victor was holding. “Drop that bit and
grab this other end and we’ll meet in the middle.”

“Excellent idea!” Victor smiled wide, in that open and honest way that made the butterflies in Yuri’s stomach take flight, and he moved to do as instructed.

They all made varied progress at that point, the five of them laughing and joking as the massive pile of tangled lights in the middle of their loose circle got smaller and the piles of neatly coiled lights on the outside of their circle multiplied.

Nothing they had done so far that day could have been called easy work per se, but Yuri found he truly was enjoying himself right then. It also certainly didn’t hurt that every so often he would be able to brush his hands against Victor’s as they worked their way through wrapping up the section of the pile that they had claimed for themselves.

“What are you dumbasses doing?” The conversation ground to a halt and they all looked up at the same time to find Yurio glowering down at them.

“What does it look like we’re doing?” Victor apparently wasn’t phased at all by Yurio’s downright venomous glare. “We’re organizing! Care to join us?”

“More like making a giant mess.” Yurio crossed his arms over his chest and sneered at the large pile strung between JJ and Chris. Yuri did have to admit that those two in particular had done more talking than actual work, but it wasn’t like they hadn’t done anything at all. At least, they’d done enough that Yurio’s condescension wasn’t entirely warranted for once. “I knew they should have listened to me and sent literally anyone else to collect your merry band of idiots. We’ve been waiting for you for over fifteen minutes now.”

“Ah… I felt like I was forgetting something…”

“You didn’t forget shit. You just didn’t want to come back and have to do more interviews.” Yurio kicked his brother in the hip and Victor cringed away, actually looking truly apologetic for a moment. “Do you know how many stupid questions they made me answer waiting for you to come back with them? More than I could keep count of. You fucking owe me.”

“Well, you’re here now.” Chris cut in with much more enthusiasm than the moment probably warranted. “Want to help us instead and then no one has to do any interviews?”
Yurio’s scowl deepened as he thought over Chris’ proposal. For a brief second Yuri thought the younger prince was going to dig in his heels and insist they came with him out of spite and a desire to put them through whatever he’d just been put through on his own. He eventually must have thought the better of it, though, as he ended up dropping down into the space between Yuri and JJ.

That most likely wasn’t the best place for him, but no one appeared to want to argue about it. Presumably to prevent Yurio from changing his mind and forcing them to go do their duty instead of hiding like they were.

“They’re going to come find us eventually.” Yuri whispered to Victor as Yurio argued with JJ over which strand he wanted to work on in the background. “We’re not even really hiding. We’re sitting in the middle of the courtyard not even trying to be quiet.”

“We’re kind of off to the side and under some trees…” Victor gave Yuri one of his more over the top pouts. “I know they’re going to find us eventually. They always do, and they would even if we were truly hiding, but it’s not hurting anything to put them off for just a bit. Trust me. They have plenty to occupy themselves with around here. They might even get desperate enough to try and interview one of the actual volunteers! That could be a fun and interesting angle for a story, couldn’t it?”

“I guess that’s an option… Wait. Wasn’t Chloe with you guys? You didn’t leave her over there all by herself, did you?” Yuri asked, abruptly concerned Victor and Yurio had abandoned the princess to face the various news crews gathered on the edge of the festival’s grounds alone and with no reprieve coming.

“No, he only abandoned me.” Suddenly Yuri wished he wasn’t wedge in between the royal brothers. Yurio was not above throwing elbows or any other body part and he never had struck Yuri as someone who particularly cared about people getting caught in the crossfire when he deemed it necessary to try and physically harm someone he was upset with. “Chloe got a phone call like ten minutes in and ran off to take it. Haven’t seen her since, but, if she’s smart, she’s hiding in a much better place than we are.”

“She’s always on her phone these days.” Phichit pointed out as he shoved another neatly rolled cord off to the side. He actually almost sounded jealous as well as curious and Yuri knew he was definitely looking forward to getting his own phone back soon. “It’s enough to make a man wonder who she’s giggling with on the other end.”

“You know, I’m not actually sure.” Victor answered, as Phichit had pretty clearly aimed that statement his way. There was enough of a tilt to his lips and a glint in his eye as he flicked his gaze over to Yuri so quickly he felt like he might have imagined it if he hadn’t known better to give Yuri a pretty good idea that he did know… And that Yuri most likely knew as well. “Could be anyone. Maybe someone back in Britannia? It has been awhile since she’s been back, so it could be one of
her brothers or sisters. You could always ask her.”

“Maybe I will.” Phichit taunted right back. Yuri wasn’t even sure that was an idle threat, but he was confident enough in Chloe’s ability to keep a secret. “How much longer do you think we’re going to have before they give up on Yurio coming back and they send someone new to get us and what are our odds of convincing them to join us as well as opposed to them forcing us to go do those dreaded interviews?”

“Depends on who they send next. Some would go away if Yurio or I get stern with them, but others wouldn’t care.” Victor paused as he tapped his index finger against his pursed lips like he always did when he was deep in thought. “None of the advisors came today, so, as long as it’s not Minako or Otabeck, we should be okay.”

“You guys do know we’re not really hiding, right? We’re doing exactly what we were told to exactly where we were told to do it.” Chris held up a particularly knotted strand as though presenting it as evidence. “See? We’re following directions for once.”

“We’re following one set of directions.” JJ pointed out as he gracefully dodged where Yurio tried to elbow him in the ribs the second he opened his mouth.

“We can always tell whoever comes looking for us that neither Victor nor Yurio told us about the change in directions.” Chris suggested evenly. “Then it’s just a matter of who they will believe.”

“They’ll believe us.” Yuri stated confidently. He inclined his head in the direction slightly to the left and behind Phichit’s head and the others glanced over to see Minako walking purposefully in their direction. “Minako will definitely believe us over them. We should be good.”

“Oh, that’s just not fair.” Victor whined and turned and gave Yuri his biggest puppy dog eyed stare. The one Yuri knew the prince knew for a fact made Yuri’s stomach flip over and his brain melt. “Please don’t throw us to the wolves, Yuri. Please?”

Yuri didn’t get a chance to reassure Victor verbally that he’d just been teasing, but he figured Victor probably already knew that despite his dramatic display. In any case, he pulled his end of the lights they’d been working on until he got Victor’s hand close enough for him to be able to reach out to give the prince a reassuring squeeze.

Victor returned the gesture without a moment’s hesitation and dropped his hand the second Minako
pulled even with their little group as she loomed over them with her hands on her hips and her expression thunderous.

“When I find whoever thought it was a good idea to send you two to bring them back, I’m going to strangle them. They’re going to beg me to fire them by the time I’m done.” When nobody did anything other than stare back at her with varying degrees of feigned, wide-eyed innocence, Minako made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a growl and drummed her fingers against her hip. “Come on, gentlemen. You’ve put it off long enough. Look at it this way, the faster you get these interviews over with, the faster you get to go inside for lunch where there is central heating and fresh food.”

That statement did cause a smattering of positive sounding grumbles and proved enough to get at least JJ and Phichit to their feet.

Yuri knew they weren’t going to be able to get out of it, and it wasn’t the interviews he was worried about in any case. Interviews were surprisingly easy now that he was more familiar with the script he was expected to use. It was what he knew was coming after that which had him wanting to linger even as Chris, Yurio, and Victor rose to their own feet.

Lunch was going to be with the company’s dancers after all.

They’d been in rehearsals all morning, which had put Yuri at ease as they had worked at setting up decorations. He’d been so relieved and focused, he’d barely even paid much attention to the photographers on the outskirts taking pictures of their progress like he normally would have been.

He should have known that calm wouldn’t have lasted. With him it never did.

“Ready to go, Yuri?” Yuri blinked and looked up at the question to find Victor grinning down at him and holding out a hand for him to take. Completely back in the present, Yuri took Victor’s hand and allowed the other man to pull him to his feet. “It won’t be so bad now that you guys are going to be there.”

“You’re right. It won’t be so bad.” Yuri agreed, not dropping the prince’s hand as they started to make their way over to where they were wanted. He felt warmth spread through his chest as Victor didn’t move to let go either.

As if by magic, Yuri didn’t feel quite as overwhelmingly nervous as he had before. He’d almost forgotten that he wasn’t going to have to face the remnants of his old life alone.
He had Victor now. He wasn’t returning alone and ashamed. He didn’t have to hide away from whatever his old coworkers might think. It shouldn’t have even mattered to him what they thought in the first place. His life wasn’t, and never had been, their business and their opinions shouldn’t count no matter what he decided to do in the end.

He had never come here to dance in order to impress them, after all. He’d done it for himself. Perhaps for reasons that had never been entirely clear even to himself, but that were important none the less.

And now he wasn’t anywhere near the same terrified teenager he’d been when he’d come to the ballet the first time. He wasn’t the same boy who cried himself to sleep for the first week he’d been there and who’d almost bought the first plane ticket home the minute he got his first paycheck.

Now, he no longer wilted underneath cruel whispers and stares and gossip. It wasn’t like his anxiety was gone forever, because he knew life hadn’t and never would work that way, but he wasn’t the same young boy that let it run roughshod over him and convince him he wasn’t good enough and never would be no matter how much hard work he put in.

And he definitely was no longer alone.

Yuri was starting to get the feeling that he might never be truly alone again, no matter what choice he ended up making. Somehow, he could no longer envision a life without Victor in it in some way.

He still couldn’t say what was going to happen in the future or where their relationship would be once they had the conversation Yuri kept putting off, but he did know he never wanted to let Victor go. Not willingly.

Now he just had to figure out what he truly wanted to do.

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They were ushered away from the news crews and out of the, now steadily blowing, December wind after about an hour of interviews.
Yuri wasn’t given enough time to grasp exactly what was going to be waiting for him as soon as they’d been led down the narrow sidewalks towards the ballet’s living quarters and dorms. They were behind schedule and rushed and Yuri didn’t even realize what was happening until they were already in the warmth of the dining hall and being shown through a crowd of curious looking people still in leggings and dance shoes underneath their winter coats.

The Director was waiting for them at the head of what had to have been multiple tables pushed together end to end to make one long table, since Yuri didn’t remember them ever having anything quite so massive when he’d been there.

She was an older woman, probably around the queen’s age actually, if Yuri cared to guess, maybe a little older. Her hair was completely grey and pulled away from her face into a high ponytail and her warm, brown eyes assessed all the members of their group. Her skin was tan and showing signs of wrinkles that could no longer be completely hidden by make-up and Yuri felt a sharp bolt of tension run up the length of his spine.

It wasn’t that she was mean, but she always had been fairly strict and Yuri instinctively raised his shoulders and tried to stand straight and at attention without making it seem too obvious that was what he was doing. Logically he knew that he wasn’t in any trouble and that he wasn’t even officially employed there any longer, but he did know that one of her major pet peeves was bad posture and there wasn’t any harm in giving into old habits.

“Your Highness.” The Director bowed her head to each Victor, Chloe, and Yurio in turn and then inclined her head to the rest of them. “Gentlemen. Thank you for being here today and thank you for making this event possible. It has the makings of a successful annual event if all goes well tomorrow.”

“The credit for that all goes to the Elite and Queen Lillia. I’m afraid my brother and I haven’t had the chance to actually do much. This is a cause that is close to my stepmother’s heart, after all… And on that note, it’s a pleasure to meet you at last Madame Villa.” Victor held out his hand and the Director shook it without hesitation. “I’ve heard many good things about you and your corps of dancers. It will be an honor to watch them perform tomorrow evening.”

“Of course, it will be an honor to perform for you, and for everyone else who will be attending the festival tomorrow.” This time, when Madame Villa smiled, Yuri was almost certain she aimed it towards him. “Well, I’ll have plenty of time to speak with all of you when we go on our tour later. For now, I’m sure you’re all very hungry.”

“Starving.” Yurio grumbled as he elbowed his way past Yuri to the front of the group. “What do you have for us to eat?”
“You’ll have to excuse my younger brother’s manners, he gets cantankerous when he’s hungry.” Victor held up his hands as though in surrender, and if he heard Chris’ muttered ‘he’s a cantankerous shit even when he’s not hungry’, he didn’t show it. Though Phichit had to hide a bark of laughter under the guise of a cough and Yuri nearly bit through the inside of his cheek trying not to have to do the same.

For Yurio’s part he simply growled something too low to understand and stomped off to where some tables were set up off to the side with food already laid out on them.

“I really do apologize…”

“No need to worry. Queen Lillia has told me much about the both of you whenever we get the chance to take afternoon tea together. I’m not offended in the slightest.” Madame Villa smiled and gestured towards where some of the other dancers were hovering nervously around the food tables at that point, clearly hungry and not wanting to risk moving into the younger prince’s space. “Please, eat. I know most of the dancers are excited to meet you all.”

Yuri could recognize a dismissal when he heard one and he nodded once in the director’s direction as he peeled off towards the food, the other’s following behind in his wake and Victor slipping back into his, now familiar, place at his side.

“Sometimes I wish Yurio could think to hold his tongue for a change.” Victor had pitched his voice low and Yuri paused in order to let JJ, Chris, Phichit, and Chloe fall into line ahead of them.

“I’m sure she really didn’t mind at all. Madame Villa has been the director here for two decades now. She’s seen every single attitude under the sun. She wouldn’t hold it against him.” Yuri huffed out a quiet laugh. “Though, I’m sure Queen Lillia will get an earful about his behavior the next time they meet. That might actually end up worse for Yurio than anyone taking offense right now.”

“You’re right about that.” Victor still seemed a bit upset, though, so Yuri reached out and grabbed his hand.

“He’ll grow out of it. Being a teenager sucks even if you don’t add being a prince on top of it.” Yuri ran his thumb back and forth over the ridges of Victor’s knuckles. “I’m sure you had your fair share of less than stellar moments and you turned out alright.”

“How do you know that?” Victor asked. “I’ll have you know, I’ve been an expert at media relations
since I was old enough to speak in full sentences.”

Yuri couldn’t help but raise a skeptical eyebrow and let out a soft chuckle. “Victor, I know that because I’ve known you for longer than five minutes. You might not have thrown temper tantrums in public, but you certainly weren’t an angel.”

“Ah, my Yuri, you’ve seen right through me like always.” Victor let out what was now an achingly familiar dramatic sigh. The kind where Yuri knew he was mostly teasing, but there was still something just a little bit off with the prince’s smile. Or maybe it was the way the twinkle in his blue eyes wasn’t quite as vibrant as it usually was when they were joking around.

Of course, before Yuri could open his mouth to press further or ask Victor if he was all right, they were interrupted by Minako calling Victor’s name across the crowd as she beckoned him to come over to where she was standing next to a group of three young looking dancers.

“Ah… Looks like duty calls.” This time Victor’s sigh sounded more real and less dramatic. “I should go see what she wants before she comes over here and makes me do it anyway. Grab us some food and save me a spot?”

“Yeah, sure.” They bumped shoulders and exchanged quick smiles and then Victor was off, weaving through where the crowd was making a hole for him to make it over to Minako’s side.

Yuri grabbed two plates and was pretty much left alone as he piled some food onto the both of them. Even as he wove his way from the more crowded buffet tables back to the long table in the center of the room, no one stopped him or impeded his progress. He gracefully sidestepped where Chris and Phichit were already holding court surrounded by a group of teenagers that had to have been from the training corps and found two empty places towards the end of the table furthest from the door.

He never had liked purposefully drawing attention to himself and it seemed like his old habits had come back in full force in such a familiar environment. The old dancers might have been able to pick him out of the hubbub of people greeting friends, gathering lunch, and settling in to eat it, but for those who were new or who were with the training corps or the traveling company who didn’t spend mealtimes with the main company, it would be easy enough for him to pass unnoticed with his bowed head and hunched shoulders.

“Yuri! Wow, it really is you. It’s so good to see you! We’ve missed you!” A small willowy girl Yuri was pretty sure was named Aria dropped into the empty seat on the opposite side of where he’d placed Victor’s plate with a wide grin and a relaxed posture. She didn’t even seem to notice that he’d nearly jumped out of his own chair in surprise. Then again, she never had been one for polite
introductions or even really announcing her presence outside of shouting either. He didn’t recall spending much time with her outside of the studio, but he had danced several duets with her and she had always been nice to him. Focused, hardworking, and not too demanding when it counted. “How have you been? I really have missed you. Ugh, I’ve been paired with Devin since you left and he drops me at least twice a week.”

“That’s not true, it’s closer to twice a practice.” Another dancer, one Yuri wasn’t sure he recognized, responded and the whole table laughed. A blonde boy several seats down, a boy Yuri remembered was Devin, turned red and sputtered out denials. The dancer who had spoke turned back to Yuri and extended his hand across the table for him to shake. “I’m Chase. I just got moved up to the main company a few months ago, but I’ve heard a lot about you. It’s great to finally get to meet you in person.”

“Oh, um… Yes, nice to meet you, too.” Yuri pulled his hand back to his side of the table after a firm handshake and tried to figure out what, if anything, he had to say. He couldn’t say he’d ever had a complete stranger ever actually seem genuinely excited to meet him before, or have someone so clearly recognize him even though he knew they’d never met.

Though he supposed that was something he was definitely going to have to get used to. Cooped up in the palace, it had been all too easy to forget that the entire country had been watching him for the past almost eight months. He was probably never going to be able to be completely anonymous again no matter what happened.

For what it was worth, neither Chase nor Aria acted like they were put out by his hesitance at all.

“I know it’s too late to work you into the main performance, but do you think there might be time to see you dance in a small showcase or something?” Chase sounded truly eager about that and Yuri had to forcibly shove down a spike of anxiety tinged with confusion and genuine fear. He couldn’t fathom why anyone here, also top tier dancers in their own rights, would want to see him dance.

Not only was he in no way prepared for any kind of performance, he couldn’t even begin to comprehend why this complete stranger could want to see one from him under any circumstances.

“Chase!” Aria leant across the table and smacked the other dancer on the shoulder hard enough that the noise almost echoed and he cringed in response. She glanced around quickly and then pitched her voice so low Yuri had trouble making out the words over the din of everyone else’s conversations in the room even though she was sitting right next to him. “He left because he got hurt, idiot.”
“Oh… Oh my god. I’m so sorry!” All the blood instantly drained out of Chase’s face as he stuttered out his apology. “I-I didn’t think, I know I’ve heard that, but…”

“It’s fine. It’s fine.” Yuri could feel his face burning as he blushed and waved his hands frantically in front of his face. They were making a small scene and Yuri tried to calm down as he felt the curious gaze of others turn over to them. “I’m actually much better. I guess it wasn’t as bad as it originally looked, so, you know, no offense taken. I’ve honestly actually been dancing some lately, but I’m really out of shape and I don’t have anything prepared… Um, maybe some other time?”

“Really? That would be so awesome!”

“Ah! If you want we can do one of our old duets!” Aria’s sudden shout overpowered Chase’s exclamation easily.

“What? No, if Yuri’s doing a duet, he should do one of our old ones!” Yuri was almost elbowed in the face as a passing dancer butt into the conversation, only getting a flash of bright red hair as he dodged out of the way of an impending black eye.

“That’s not fair, Gemma. You got the last two duets with him last year.” Aria spun in her seat and pointed a finger at the grinning red-head.

“Which means our choreography will still be fresh in his head. Easier to pick back up on with a little practice.”

“Wait! Yuri’s dancing? With who?”

Yuri wasn’t exactly sure who spoke that time, the argument gaining speed and volume as more dancers jumped in with their two cents. It was entirely overwhelming and Yuri felt his cheeks burning and knew he must have looking like a neon version of a stop sign. He tried to sputter out some kind of denial, but it came out weak and no one paid it any attention.

“Wow! I leave you alone for five minutes and you’re already causing a riot. I think that might have broken Yurio’s record.” At the sound of Victor’s voice all argument ceased and some of those crowded the closest to Yuri backed away quickly.

“I didn’t do anything.” Yuri protested, choosing to focus more on the prince than the other dancers.
for the moment. A path instantly cleared and Victor dropped gracefully down into the seat Yuri had saved for him. “I-I don’t even understand why they’re fighting.”

“Oh, Yuri. That is so like you.” Aria sighed and craned around in front of Yuri in order to offer her hand for Victor to shake. “Nice to meet you, Your Highness. I’m Aria. I’ve been dancing here for about two years now. I made it into the main corps last year and they let me dance a few duets with Yuri during the fall season.”

“Pleasure to meet you.” Victor shook her hand and she settled back into her seat once he’d released it. “What’s this about Yuri potentially dancing tonight? No one bothered to mention that to me and he’s not listed on the program. Was it supposed to be a surprise?”

“I’m not dancing.” Yuri grumbled. He felt irritated for some reason he couldn’t quite put his finger on. His skin almost felt too tight, and he had to use every ounce of self-restraint he possessed not to squirm in his seat.

“We were just offering to dance with him if he decided to change his mind since his main complaint was not having a solo piece properly prepared.” Aria grinned as though she hadn’t even noticed the flat look Yuri was giving her. Perhaps she hadn’t. She was mostly looking directly over his head by that point and Yuri couldn’t help but wonder if she would get the hint if he stepped on her foot underneath the table. That sometimes worked when Phichit’s mouth started running. “Back when he was here we would literally kill to be assigned to work a piece with him. It was like he always knew exactly what to do to tie every movement together and make you look absolutely amazing out there on the stage! I know I wasn’t the only one in tears when we heard he was going home, but I guess that worked out pretty nicely all things considered.”

“Well, it certainly worked out my favor.” Victor stated. Yuri lost the battle against sitting still when Victor smiled softly down at him as he said it. Right as Yuri felt the tell-tale heat of a blush rush across his cheeks, Victor looked back up at the other dancer. “Sounds like Yuri was quite popular while he was here.”

“Definitely.” This time it was Chase the spoke up from across the table. “Everyone wanted to work with him. I was going to sign with the Arcadia Ballet last year, but then a spot with the National Touring Company opened up and I jumped at the opportunity. I hoped I could do well enough to make the main company and get a chance to dance with him one day, but I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

That was funny, Yuri thought to himself. The dancer sounded almost disappointed. Of course, that didn’t make any sense and Victor was already speaking before Yuri could try to wrap his mind around it further.
“Ah, well. Having only had the chance to dance with him a handful of times myself, I’d have to say I’d do anything to be able to do it again. I can certainly see where you’re all coming from.” Victor reached out and grabbed where Yuri’s hand had been resting on the table.

“Victor!” Yuri knew he sounded exasperated, and he kind of was in a way, but he squeezed Victor’s hand none the less to make sure the prince didn’t think Yuri was really upset with him. Embarrassed, yes, but not upset. Mostly because he would do anything to get a chance to dance with Victor again as well.

Actually, he would much prefer it if Victor was the only person he ever danced with again.

Yuri shoved that thought down. Right in the middle of a crowded luncheon was not the time or the place to say something like that and it definitely wasn’t the right place for him to really inspect that wayward feeling under a microscope like he desperately wanted to.

It was right then that Yurio decided to make a loud entrance into the conversation, complaining about not being able to find a decent seat as he glared Chase out of his chair and diverted everyone’s attention in his direction.

Yurio kept them really and truly distracted for the duration of the luncheon. Up until the dancers took their leave to go into their afternoon preparations and the rest of them were herded towards the door to meet the Assistant Director of the ballet for their promised tour by a stoic Otabeck and a demanding Minako.

It had made eating an interesting experience, but Yuri hadn’t dropped Victor’s hand until the Assistant Director had practically accosted them and drug Victor up to the front of the group.

Despite the stares he could feel from those around him, for once he hadn’t even wanted to.

~

For most of the tour, Yuri felt like he was having an out of body experience.

A part of him had already guessed that it would be strange to be led through the hallways, studios,
and performance spaces he had used to roam freely. He’d once thought of the ballet as his home, no matter the fact that he had always known his time there would be temporary in one way or another, but it was the weirdest feeling in the world to have those spaces presented to him as though he was some kind of tourist.

As though he was someone who had never lived there at all.

He could feel the waves of melancholy edging up from the depths of his subconscious. Luckily, Phichit must have either sensed Yuri’s falling mood, or he simply figured Yuri could benefit from his cheery attitude either way because he glued himself to Yuri’s side and peppered him with questions to the point where Yuri felt like he was giving his own mini-tour. With Victor well and truly trapped at the head of the group by the boisterous Assistant Director, it was the next best distraction Yuri could get.

“Oh! What’s over there?” Phichit pointed at a brown door the Assistant Director had breezed past as they made their way through the first floor of the dorms that housed the adult dancers.

“Janitor’s closet…” Yuri answered drily and then amended himself. “Well, we don’t actually have a janitor in the dorms, but that’s where all the mops and brooms and cleaning supplies are stored, so I guess it’s kind of the same thing except we are our own janitors.”

“Ah… Yeah, I guess that’s not interesting enough to be on the official tour.” Phichit slumped in on himself for a moment before he brightened up and pointed at a wall off to their left. “Oh! What’s that?”

“A window.” Yuri rolled his eyes so hard he almost gave himself a headache. “Phichit, that is literally just a window. It has zero historical significance. We use it to look outside sometimes. That’s it. That’s all it does.”

“How was I supposed to know that? It could have been a historically important window.” Phichit waved off Yuri’s second eye roll with an unconcerned giggle. “You never know. Maybe it was used by dancers of generations past to sneak in their illicit lovers.”

“I’m pretty sure it doesn’t even open.” Yuri let out a tight sigh, but it was hard to completely hide his smile. As distractions went, Phichit was a pretty good one. “Besides, we have a back door for that. There’s no cameras back there and it’s easy enough to unlock from the inside. The prevailing theory from upper management is that we can make our own terrible mistakes if we’re really determined to do so. I’m not even entirely sure this building is alarmed like the dorm for minors and the theater and practice buildings…”
“Sounds like they also don’t mind if you get kidnapped or murdered.” Phichit pointed out. “And they clearly don’t care about people bringing in illegal lovers.”

Yuri bit his bottom lip and glanced around. Aside from Chris, who was hovering near enough to them that Yuri was fairly certain he was eavesdropping, no one else was close or paying them much mind. He didn’t particularly care what Chris heard, so he decided to go ahead and let Phichit in on one of the ballet’s most obvious secrets.

“That’s because all the illegal love affairs are already inside. No need to sneak someone in, or sneak yourself out past curfew and risk losing your job, if the guy two doors down is super hot and totally into you or the girl on the third floor has been crushing on you for months.” Yuri tried to prevent himself from blushing or stuttering under Phichit’s suddenly devilish expression. He knew his friend would definitely get the wrong message if he did so. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m not blind and dancers gossip, especially when someone’s snuck in cases of alcohol for us to celebrate the end of a season. Just because I never did anything to become the center of that kind of gossip doesn’t mean my ears suddenly stopped working.”

“That makes perfect sense, actually.” Phichit must have noticed how close Chris was as he glanced over in the other man’s direction.

For his part, Chris simply winked and placed his index finger against his lips as though he was shushing them from afar.

“Remind me when we get back to the palace and I’ll tell you some of the better rumors.” Yuri sent a pointed look Chris’ way, too. “And I guess anyone else who might be listening and curious.”

Chris placed both hands over his heart and mouthed an obvious ‘who me?’ over his shoulder, before he turned back to where the Assistant Director was loudly explaining some of the rules and regulations of the dorms to a bored-looking Victor and Chloe.

“He is going to get himself in deep trouble one of these days.” Phichit muttered, though Yuri did notice the words had been said with good humor and the look in Phichit’s grey eyes was certainly not one of disdain. “Fine, so there’s nothing remotely interesting in here. At least I tried.”

“Wait until we get to the theater. There’s all kinds of interesting stuff in there. Most of the dancers don’t even spend a ton of time in the dorms anyway.” Yuri shrugged.
Phichit accepted his explanation with only a minimum of sighing, and they moved to get a bit closer so they could actually hear what was being said. Yuri tried to pay attention, but after a few minutes he felt his attention begin to wander again, at least until Phichit elbowed him in the ribs right as they moved to leave the dorms and head towards some of the studios located across a small courtyard from where they were.

“Ow! What?” Yuri hissed under his breath and rubbed his side. He was sure Phichit hadn’t meant to really hurt him, but the sharp, bony bit at the end of his elbow had caught between two of his ribs and it had stung more than a little.

“Where’s Yurio? I don’t think I’ve seen him since we left the dining hall.” Phichit whispered back, his eyes darting around the group quickly as though he had been hoping to find the missing prince before anyone else could notice he was missing.

“I don’t know, but I saw him slip out of the back door to the dining hall with Otabeck hot on his heels, so I’m sure he’s fine wherever he is.” Yuri wasn’t sure how Yurio had done earlier in the day, but he hadn’t heard any screaming, so he figured the younger prince must have behaved himself well enough up to that point. “It probably for the best that he isn’t here, honestly, and Otabeck will make sure he doesn’t get too far or get into too much trouble.”

“Maybe… I guess there’s no way Victor hasn’t noticed his brother isn’t here.” Phichit’s frown flipped into his normal grin. “He doesn’t appear concerned, so I suppose we shouldn’t be concerned either.”

“Look at it this way, if something does happen, I’m sure it’s going to be spectacular enough to grab our attentions pretty quickly.” Yuri pointed out. Part of him was a bit curious as to where Yurio might have disappeared off to and if it was somewhere much more interesting than what they were stuck in, but the other half recognized that it really wasn’t his business so long as someone responsible knew where he was and that Yurio most likely wouldn’t take too kindly to Yuri showing up uninvited.

Particularly since Minako was watching him like a hawk ever since they had showed up late to the interviews and she still hovered on the outskirts of their mid-sized retinue presumably waiting to corral him should he get any funny ideas about running away. Yurio would definitely never forgive him if he was the reason the younger prince ended up dragged back to the tour group when he otherwise would have been left alone.

Yuri wasn’t entirely sure how it had happened, but he had fostered a tenuous form of respect between himself and Yurio and he wasn’t willing to blow that up because he didn’t feel like trudging
through the rest of the tour.

He kept to the back of the group with Phichit the entire tour, and, while he did tone down his more ridiculous questions after the window incident, his friend did keep him well and truly distracted and entertained for the rest of the time. It made the time pass quickly, and Yuri did have to admit that it was fun to go over old memories with Phichit and laugh over his stories from his time there. Even with Yuri’s habit of working hard and keeping to himself, he’d spent five years there, so there was plenty to share.

It was interesting to see the world he’d once been a part of through someone else’s eyes. To be able to tell a story about how he’d gotten drunk on the evening of his twentieth birthday with a group of older dancers that were no longer with the company and point out the chip in the paint right behind the door of one of the studios where they had swung the door open too hard. To be able to laugh as he whispered to Phichit about how there used to be a potted plant in the corner, but on that same night someone had thrown up in it and one of the instructors tossed it in the dumpster and made them all stay late to run drills until they’d almost passed out because no one would step forward to say they’d done it since they’d been so drunk it really could have been any of them.

It felt good to smugly tell Phichit that it had been him and he hadn’t forgotten, but none of the instructors would probably have believed him even if he had confessed because they would never in a million years have thought he would have been so irresponsible.

He told Phichit everything. The tree in the courtyard he fell out of the summer he was nineteen and someone had said there was no way he’d ever be able to make it up to the top. He’d fallen on the way down after proving them wrong.

How the old cook used to leave a window in the back of the kitchens cracked to let some of the heat from the ovens out in the wintertime and how they would gather around back there and a thirteen year old Six who helped in the kitchens would slip them fresh tarts through the window whenever he could get away with it.

The fall nights after Yuri had gotten his license and it was his turn for the motorbike they shared and he would walk the bike down some of the narrow sidewalks behind the gym so he wouldn’t be caught past curfew revving the engine in the parking lot. How he would take it to the outskirts of the city and up one of the many high hills and just watch the city light twinkle in the distance whenever he felt homesick.

Good memories, bad ones. The time he’d gotten his hand literally caught in the cookie jar two weeks after he’d gotten there and the Director had intervened before the cook could chase him out of the kitchen with a wooden spoon. He’d taken her punishment of extra cleaning duty with only a few shed tears and her encouragement to funnel his homesickness into his dancing and not into breaking
his diet.

The time when the lock to his dorm room had gotten stuck and he’d missed two practices before someone had found him pacing his room in the midst of a blind panic because he was on the third floor at that time and climbing out the window hadn’t been an option. The time when the same thing had happened to a female dancer and she’d ended up just kicking it down and having to work off the cost of repairing it.

He remembered it all, and, before the tour was through, he had more than an audience of just Phichit. First it had been Chris who moved closer to them and further from the official tour guide. Then it had been JJ and Minako and a few of the other attendants. Some of the major donors that had been invited for the day stopped hovering at Victor’s elbow and turned more of their attention his way. With about thirty minutes left in the tour, Chloe was paying more attention to him as well.

Finally, Victor gave up all pretense of listening to anyone else and by the time they made it to the theater at long last the prince was at his side in the place that was fast becoming his usual spot.

“Did the breakers really blow an hour before you were all set to go on stage?” Victor had been hanging onto every word as though the stories Yuri told were the most interesting he’d ever heard before. Yuri laughed and nodded. “Wow! What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. The Director sent some of the junior dancers out to buy as many cheap candles as they could find in half an hour and we passed them out to the audience and used some old oil lamps the Costume Director found in an attic in one of the dorms for the stage lighting and the stagehands strung some battery operated electric lanterns from ropes to shine down on the stage and we billed it as a ‘special performance’.” Yuri shrugged. “In retrospect, I’m kind of impressed no one set anything on fire.”

“It was a good idea. The next three shows were sold out within a few hours of the box office opening the next day.” The Assistant Director cut in with his big, booming laugh. To Yuri’s immense relief, he hadn’t been put out at all when Yuri’s anecdotes won out over his own pre-determined notes and points, and he’d even asked Yuri some questions of his own from time to time, particularly when they had been back in the living areas where he didn’t often go. “We ran the performances like that for two weeks afterwards, until Madame Villa had finally had enough and decided to put an end to it before someone really did set something on fire. There were a few close calls if I recall…”

“It still sounds like it must have been quite the show. Have you ever thought about doing it again?” Chloe asked, eyes bright and hands folded neatly at her waistline. “You know, with more planning and better safety standards?”
“It’s an idea that has been tossed around a few times…” The Assistant Director threw open the door that lead from the spacious lobby and into the theater. He ushered them forward and they filed through and began to make their way slowly towards the stage. “Do you know when your family might be back in town again, Your Highness? I know Queen Grace has accompanied Queen Lillia to the ballet a time or two when she was in the country and there was enough time. We can certainly see about staging a special performance for all of you.”

“Oh! That would be lovely!” Chloe clapped her hands together. “I’ll be sure to send word ahead next time. Mother would love that.”

The whole group moved on then as they walked down past the tiered seating and towards the massive stage at the end of the room.

For a moment, Yuri lingered behind, the others passing him by as they clamored to follow-up on Chloe’s suggestion, some of the major donors attempting to get potential dates out of her so they could make sure secure tickets for themselves. He wasn’t even sure what it was, but something held him in place.

Only Victor noticed his hesitance. Yuri wasn’t surprised. Victor noticed a lot more than he let on about and, when it came to Yuri, sometimes it felt like there wasn’t anything he didn’t see.

“You coming?” There was a note of concern in Victor’s tone, even as he kept a pleasant smile on his face. Enough that Yuri felt a sharp tug on his heart along with the urge to make it go away.

“In a minute. I just… I want to look at it… Just for a minute.” Yuri smiled softly and Victor’s eyes softened and a peek of his real self shone through for a brief flash before his expression settled back into the polite mask he always wore in public. “I’ll come join you in a minute, I promise.”

“Okay. Just don’t make it a long minute.” Victor winked at him and laughed the second Yuri felt his cheeks heat.

Yuri shook his head fondly as he watched Victor take long strides in order to catch back up as everyone else made to climb the hidden steps at stage right in order to step back into the wings.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? Seeing the stage from this point of view.”
Yuri almost jumped out of his skin and he turned his head to find the Director had walked up silently behind him while he’d been deep in thought.

“I… Um… Yes.” Yuri took a deep breath and straightened his spine and stood tall. Feeling a little less flustered, he turned back to stare down the rows of push seats and back towards the stage, keeping the Director’s form in his periphery. “I can’t say I’ve ever actually stood back here and taken a good look at it from this angle before… I’ve always either been on it or waiting in the wings.”

“It’s a humbling experience, I would guess, especially for someone who is used to being center stage.” Madame Villa raised one shoulder in an elegant shrug. “I wouldn’t know from personal experience how that feels, dancing like that never was my calling, but I do know that there can be interesting things to be found by looking at something from another angle every once in a while.”

“That I’ve come to know very well recently.” Yuri agreed with a rough bark of laughter. “It wasn’t easy to see it at first. I couldn’t imagine a world where getting back up on that stage would never be an option again, but I guess there is some truth in the saying ‘time heals all wounds’, or, at least, it stiches them back up and makes them numb enough that you can almost forget they’re there.”

Madame Villa made a quiet noise of agreement and they stood there together in a moment of silence felt like it lasted forever until she cleared her throat and spoke again.

“I owe you an apology, Yuri.” This time Yuri turned away from the stage and looked at the Director. She did look sorry, her eyes soft and even her entire posture more relaxed that he had ever seen it. She looked… Well, she looked old and tired and Yuri was suddenly struck by the thought that she had been at the ballet for decades, long before he had been there and she continued to be there long after he had left. “You must believe me. When we received your official medical review, we had no reason not to take the doctor at his word. When I made my decision to let you go, I truly thought I was doing what was best.”

“Who told you?” Yuri didn’t have to ask what she had been told. It was obvious she knew about Yuri’s new diagnosis.

“No one. You can trust that no one broke any confidentiality rules.” Madame Villa closed her eyes for a moment and took a quiet breath. “When the palace doctor couldn’t get a timely response from the office of our former physician in regards to a request for your medical records, they reached out to my office instead. It took far too long to get to the bottom of it, but… You have to know it wasn’t anything personal. It seems he was cutting costs wherever he could and pocketing the profits. When he didn’t get a clear image on your first scan, he simply made a diagnosis based on his educated guess as opposed to getting a clean shot, which would have had to come out of his own pocket as he
botched the first scan by allowing an object into the field of the scan.”

She let him digest that newest bit of information on his own. Yuri’s mind whirred as he tried to think his way through all the nooks and crannies in his mind.

He supposed he should feel angry. His entire career had been yanked away from him simply because someone had decided their own bank account was more important than doing his due diligence. He should have been disappointed or sad or something, but in the end, he was just numb.

“I don’t pretend to know what your situation truly is at the present moment, but I do want you to know that you would have a place here, should you choose you wanted to take it.” She smiled at him then, a smile with warmth that reached her eyes. “You would have a spot with the main company again, of course.”

“I would be a Three. I wouldn’t be able to dance.” It was the truth, no matter how much it hurt him to say it. He’d thought it at least a million times, but he’d never allowed himself to say it out loud. To say it somehow made it more real in a way, made it permanent.

That was the greatest irony in the whole situation that he had been hiding from the entire time.

He could dance again… But he also couldn’t.

“I’m sure you can do whatever you put your mind to. Besides, it’s not like there isn’t a precedent for it.” Madame Villa’s smile faltered somewhat. “The Queen was a beautiful dancer in her day. It was sad to see her eventually leave us, though she did leave behind a wonderful history for us to expand upon… I would think that a man in your position would be hard pressed to find many doors that would be closed to him if there was something he really wanted on the other side.”

Yuri didn’t know what to say to that. She was right. It he pushed hard enough, he could have his place back at the ballet. He knew he could. He didn’t even have to ask to know Victor would do anything in his power to make sure Yuri had everything he ever wanted, even if it broke his heart in the process. If he wanted to go back to his old life, the door was open and that path would lead to something much better than he ever thought it might.

He could dance for a few more seasons, if he was careful. Eventually his body would give out and he would need to take his final bow and let new dancers move into his spot and live their own dreams. He would have to move on to a new calling and a new purpose. That was the part of his
story that had never been clear to him before. As a Three that part wasn’t as foggy as it had been.

For the first time, he could see every step along the road that would end with him standing at the back of this theater again one day. Only, this time, he would be in the Director’s shoes.

He could do it.

It would only mean giving up the only person he’d ever truly loved.

“You don’t have to decide today. Given what has already happened, I would be remiss if I didn’t ensure you knew all your options. I couldn’t do that to you. Not again.” Madame Villa held out her hand and, after a split second’s hesitation, Yuri took it.

“Thank you. Thank you for everything.” Yuri shook her hand firmly and then released it.

“You will always have a place here, Yuri. You’ve more than earned it.”

Yuri nodded once more and Madame Villa nodded in return as she straightened back up and strode off down the aisle towards the stage without another word. He watched her go until she, too, disappeared up the hidden stairway.

It took him almost a full minute to calm where his heart had started beating so hard he was afraid it might have tried to come right out of his chest.

The stage was still empty, the lights shining down on it and showing every scar in it’s surface. Every scuff mark that wouldn’t come out no matter how hard it was scrubbed. The worn spots and rough patches that could never be completely buffed out. Under the harsh lights he saw it all, even from as far back as he was.

Seeing all the steps that had lead him to where he now was from a different angle just as the Director had said.

But those steps had already been taken. He couldn’t do them over again. All he could do was take his next steps forward, even knowing he wasn’t able to see exactly where his path would take him.
He had to trust the choices he made, like he had trusted the choices that had brought him so far already.

The time for dithering was gone. It was time for him to make that choice.

For better or worse.

~

The rest of that day and the next passed by in a blur for Yuri.

He did all the things he was expected to do. He helped put the finishing touches on some of the outside displays once the tour was through. He went back to the palace with everyone and slogged through the endless torture that was three hours of live television focused on trivial issues like who was going to be wearing what to the festival and the upcoming Christmas Ball.

One good thing was that he was too exhausted to spend more than an hour or so in bed awake that night worrying before he succumbed to a deep sleep.

Even getting to spend a good portion of the morning wandering through the stalls and booths that had been set up with Victor at his side enjoying the fruits of all their hard work passed by for too quickly, and then Victor had been drawn away by a harried assistant and told he needed to spend some time with each of the Elite. Neither or them had liked it, but Yuri had spent the rest of the morning and afternoon with Yurio, Chris, and Phichit, when the other Elite hadn’t been on media advisor mandated time with Victor that was, and he found he had enjoyed himself.

It hadn’t been easy to put aside the itchy thoughts swirling inside his brain, but he had managed. It was almost over anyway. The only thing left was the Elite taking the stage to give their thanks to all the donors and volunteers and then it was only the main performance itself and the festival would be over and Yuri wouldn’t be able to put off making his choice any longer.

The energy backstage was electric.

No one was still. Everyone moved with a purpose, lost in their own last minute preparations or
rituals. Stagehands moved around in their black outfits as they muttered into hidden microphones and carried props and costumes to where they belonged. Dancers used any space they could find to stretch and run through bits of footwork.

The four Elite stood alone in the middle of it all without really having a true place. They’d been deposited in the wings by the entrance to stage left and told to stay out of the way until someone came to make sure they were prepared to take the stage and deliver that night’s introduction to the performance.

It made Yuri’s skin itch to be backstage with nothing to do. He didn’t even have a line in the speech, they’d given it all over to JJ who deserved it for being the one person in their little committee who had taken everything seriously from the very beginning. Every cell in his body screamed that he needed to be doing something. His muscles ached and burned like they were begging him to stretch out and warm them up. It took every ounce of his self-control not to scuff his fancy dress shoes against the floor as his feet tried to ignore the commands from his brain to stay still in favor of trying to trace out old step sequences and turns.

He tried to find a way to distract himself, but Phichit and Chris were deep in conversation with each other and Yuri didn’t feel like interrupting. All the other dancers and staff had their own pre-show responsibilities they had to deal with, and the rest of their royal company had already been ushered off to the Royal Box way up at the top of the theater so they themselves didn’t become a distraction backstage.

Yuri ran his hands through his hair and almost gave in to the urge to start pacing when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

JJ had stood off to the side, which was off enough as he typically thrived in the center of attention…

He didn’t look good either once Yuri took a closer look. Even in the dim backstage lighting, Yuri could see how pale the other man’s face was. How his lips were pressed together in a thin line and how his fingers clenched and unclenched at his side, the knuckles almost bright white even in the darkness from how tight JJ had curled his fingers. He definitely couldn’t see it from so far away, but Yuri was sure there would be indents on the other man’s palm from his nails digging in.

If he hadn’t known all the signs so intimately himself, Yuri was sure he wouldn’t have believed his eyes.

The last person he ever expected to see in the throes of anxiety was JJ.
As Yuri started to desperately wonder what, if anything, he should do, JJ must have sensed someone was looking at him. They locked eyes and JJ took a single step back.

For a brief moment, Yuri was tempted to turn away. Tempted to pretend he’d never seen it at all. He rarely knew what to do when his own nerves tried to get the best of him. He definitely didn’t know the first thing about helping others through it and he wasn’t even sure JJ would want his help even if he offered it.

In fact, he’d basically made up his mind to politely turn around and maybe join Chris and Phichit after all in order to give JJ some privacy, when JJ shifted again and Yuri caught sight of the pure panic in the other man’s eyes.

That decided it. He might not have known exactly what to do, but he did know he had to do something.

“Hey, JJ. How are you?” Yuri approached him as slowly and calmly as he could, giving JJ plenty of time to signal for him to back off if he wanted.

“I’m fine. I’m totally cool.” JJ let out a weak chuckle that made even himself wince. “Okay… I’m a little nervous. No big deal. It’s just been a few months since I’ve been in front of such a large, live audience. Once I get out there it’ll all come back to me and I’ll be totally fine.”

Yuri nodded as he tried to think of something to say, but he came up blank.

Silence seemed to have been the right answer because, after about thirty seconds of it, JJ’s hastily constructed mask cracked and crumbled with a loud sigh.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. This is so stupid. I’ve done this a million times.” JJ shook his head and took a deep breath that was probably meant as an attempt to steady himself. “I hate it when this happens.”

“It happens often?” Yuri asked softly and he angled his body so that no one would be able to see past him.

JJ shrugged. “Almost every time I have to do something scripted in front of a live audience… It
hasn’t been this bad in a long time. I mean, I knew I was letting the pressure build up again, but I thought… I thought it wouldn’t be so bad. It shouldn’t be this bad.”

“That’s the fun thing about anxiety. It doesn’t ever do what it should do.” Yuri leant forward some and lowered his voice. No one running around was paying attention to them from what he could tell, but he knew well enough that could change without a moment’s notice. “It just does what it wants to do and leaves you scrambling to pick up the pieces.”

“I…” JJ struggled for words for a moment. “You’re right. I just… I don’t… Wait… Does that mean…? Do you…?”

“Yeah. It’s the worst, isn’t it?” Yuri glanced around, but it still looked like they were on their own for the time being. “I’m not going to lie, if I actually had to speak out there, or do anything more than just stand there really, I’d be a mess, too.”

“But didn’t you…? I mean, you used to do this all the time, right?” JJ huffed out a weak laughed and gestured towards where the empty stage was waiting for them. “Same stage and everything.”

“Well, I never let it stop me.” That much was true. It had certainly been worse in the beginning, and his first performance had been spent with unshed tears blurring his vision the entire time. He’d spent the entirety of the rest of that night curled up under his bed in his room, but he still hadn’t quit. “If I was going to choose not to perform, it was going to be because I chose, not because anxiety chose for me. I get the feeling you’ve done the same many times.”

“Yeah…” JJ’s voice sounded stronger, though Yuri could see his hands were still trembling where they were balled up at his side. “Yeah, You’re right. I just… This is the last thing I’m going to do here before I go home. I… I want it to be perfect. I need it to be perfect. I can’t let everyone down with this, too.”

“I can guarantee you aren’t going to let anyone down. This event is already a success. Hell, you’ll probably be asked to come back and chair it next year, too.” Yuri sensed some of the tension ease and he took a chance and placed a hand on JJ’s shoulder. “And even if you flub some words or even trip and fall flat on your face, that is not going to change. I know I’m proud of you for all the hard work you’ve put into everything you’ve done while you were here, and not just this. I can’t imagine why anyone else wouldn’t be as well.”

“I know. I know, but it’s… It’s stupid…” Suddenly JJ had a really hard time looking Yuri in the eye. “I know I went about a lot of things the wrong way when I first got here. I was a competitive jerk and I shouldn’t have been. I just wanted to win so badly, and that’s stupid because there’s nothing
here to win. Everyone was just so proud of me and happy when I was Selected. My parents and siblings and friends and fans. I think half the district showed up to see me off and I knew I had to do whatever I could to make them proud, to prove I deserved my Selection. I felt like if I didn’t win, I would let them all down in some way… And then I realized not only was I going to lose, but I didn’t even want to fight to stay… But I couldn’t just give up either, so… So I figured that I could do this festival at the very least, you know? Do one big, good thing and then go home. Except now I’m going to mess this up, too.”

There was a lot there that Yuri wasn’t sure he really wanted to think too hard about. Especially since the only thing JJ had come to ‘win’ was Victor’s affections and Yuri definitely wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about that even with it pretty clear JJ wasn’t any kind of rival for him on that front.

“I understand.” Yuri did understand. At least, he understood enough to know that the last thing JJ wanted right then was to be told to stop worrying or that everything was totally fine. “You did more than just this that was good, though. You’ve been volunteering and championing your causes for years even before you came here. That had to have taken a lot of courage, and you aren’t going to cease to exist because you might go home soon… And going home isn’t losing anyway. It’s just opening up a new way to keep pushing for all the things that are truly important to you.”

Yuri’s words hung in the air for a long moment as they stared at each other in companionable silence.

“You really do believe that, don’t you?” JJ’s voice was barely above a whisper, but Yuri still managed to hear him and he nodded in response.

He really did believe it. Yuri hadn’t known he did until he’d said it out loud, but there it was. He’d probably known it all along. Known that he hadn’t been a quitter or a loser, but it had taken him until right then to accept it.

Granted, right then might not have been the best time for earth-shattering personal revelations. It had to be getting closer to the time when they would need to get ready to go out on the stage and JJ was still kind of a mess and Yuri did not need to complicate matters by becoming one as well.

“How did you do it? My mom always talks me through these breathing exercises, but…” Even without JJ saying it, Yuri could finish off his sentence. JJ’s support system wasn’t there. He was alone, at least in all the ways that mattered in that moment.

It was a feeling Yuri knew intimately.
“It wasn’t easy… Isn’t easy I guess I should say, but you already know what to do. You’ve done it a million times before, it’s your brain that gets in the way.” Yuri squeezed JJ’s shoulder once before letting him go. “It’s probably a little easier with dance steps than with spoken words, but I would always let my body do what it knew how to do and panicked about it later. It made the afterwards a lot worse, but it got me through the performance.”

“Okay.” JJ breathed deep into his chest. “Okay. I’ve got this. I can do this. JJ doesn’t let anything hold him back. He’s the king of all media. He’s got this.”

“Yeah. He does.” Yuri wasn’t entirely sure if he’d just made matters better or worse. Despite his strong words, JJ didn’t look any less pale.

They weren’t given any more time to be sure, however, as Minako raced through the area as she called their names and beckoned them to follow her over to where a few impromptu make-up stations had been set up.

Yuri counted his lucky stars that he hadn’t been given any actual spoken lines for their scheduled introduction and he hoped JJ would be fine like he professed he would.

All he could do was hope that he’d managed to help, even if it had only been a small bit…

~

It was finally, blessedly, over.

No more long planning sessions to sit through, or giving interviews on the sidewalk until his face felt frozen. No more sitting in the dark watching Victor watch him out of the corner of his eye and knowing the prince was doing nothing other than worrying about how Yuri was feeling watching other people doing what he used to do for so long.

But Victor wasn’t there right then. He’d gone outside with the rest of the crowds once the performance had come to its end. In all the hustle and bustle of people all trying to get back out to the festival where fireworks were scheduled within the next few minutes, no one had noticed Yuri as he lagged behind.
In fact, the whole theater was empty. He was sure people would come back eventually. There was cleaning to do that wouldn’t be able to wait for the morning, but, for now, he had the whole place completely to himself.

He slowly climbed the hidden stairwell at stage right and slipped past the curtains. With long, confident steps he moved out to the center of the stage. He’d been right in that spot twice in the past two days. Once with the tour group and then again not even three hours previous to stand smiling while JJ stumbled through his introduction.

Now, he was alone.

It was rare, even when he had been with the ballet, for him to stand where he was without anyone else around him. The few solos he’d had in his tenure there had been part of larger productions, with a corps of dancers at his back even if the spotlight had rested on him for the moment.

He couldn’t remember if he’d ever been the only one out there at any one time.

Well, he was now. Yuri dug through his pockets until he pulled out his music player.

He didn’t even know why he’d thought to grab it that morning, but he had. Yuri undid his suit jacket and shrugged it off as he tossed it down into the orchestra pit underneath him. He untucked his crisp, white dress shirt and undid the top two buttons. He placed earbuds in his ears and queued up the track for the dance he’d been struggling with ever since the idea for it had first come to him the day his family had gone home after their visit.

He felt like he could finally dance it the way it was meant to be danced.

As the opening strains of the piano filled his ears, Yuri held his hands out at his sides and then slowly lifted his head and brought them together as he raised them up to his chest.

And then he danced.

Yuri had intended, in some vague way, to make this piece a culmination of his life so far. The first part flowed easily.
The steps and leaps and spins came up naturally and with ease. His discovery of his love of dance, his determination to work hard and be the best. The people who had supported him.

His parents, who had gone without in order to ensure his shoes didn’t stay worn for too long. Who fed him and took him to lessons before he was old enough to take himself. Mari, who would walk him down to the park in their neighborhood in the summer and who would let him use her music player to practice with Yuko in the shade of the tall trees there. His sister who would catch him sneaking in at night when he’d spent too long at the studio and would only wink at him and point him towards a plate of dinner that had been left out for him with a quirk of her lips.

Yuko and Takeshi, for whom they had risked everything once, but who had always been there for him even before that. Yuko, who pushed him when he thought he would never be good enough to amount to anything and who always held her hand out to help him back up when he fell. Takeshi, who never let him wallow when things didn’t go his way, who worked long hours for far too little and who never had a bad thing to say even when they had drawn him out of bed at the crack of dawn to run down to the market where they could buy ribbons and cloth for their costumes at half price if they made it there early enough.

His instructor when he had been little who had encouraged him to try out for bigger and more complex roles. The Director of the National Ballet who had seen an audition tape he’d sent them and extended him an offer he couldn’t refuse. All the dancers who he’d learned with over his time there. They all taught him lessons whether he’d known it or not at the time.

Why had he wanted to dance there, on that specific stage?

Yuri had asked himself that question so often in the past few weeks, ever since he’d known he could potentially do so again. Why had he wanted it so badly back then that he’d danced on open blisters and bandaged his bruised and bleeding feet each night, knowing he would bleed again the next day? Why had he spent hours running, stretching, lifting weights, and practicing for so long that he could dance entire productions with his eyes closed and the music off because he didn’t need the score to know his cues?

For his family. For their safety and the money he was able to send home to them. A little bit for himself and the feeling he couldn’t get anywhere else but with the bright lights shining down on him. Because when the music was playing, he couldn’t hear anything else, or worry about anything else.

But he didn’t need a stage to do that.

He had reached the middle part, the earbuds had fallen out of his ears as some point but he didn't
need them to hear the music in his head as his back arched as far as it would go and his arms stretched out as he caught his breath before flowing into the next movement. This was the part that had always given him trouble. It was the part that symbolized the injury that had led him to his Selection.

That had led him to Victor.

It had led him to more than Victor, though. It had led him to Michele, Emil, and Seung-Gil. To Georgi and JJ. Leo and Guang Hong. Minako and Mila. It had brought him to friends like Phichit and Chris and even Chloe and Yurio.

Each and every one of them had been there for him in their own ways, had opened his eyes and shown him things he hadn’t even realized he never knew. He never would have met any of them without being Selected, and now he understood he was all the better for having had them in his life. For adding smoothness to steps that had once been hesitant and unsure.

And then there was Victor himself.

Victor who wanted nothing more than to have a partner, a friend. Victor who was willing to give up his one chance at love to further a cause that would help the country. Victor who had begged his father for a poodle after his mother had died so he wouldn’t be so lonely at night and who had felt like he’d needed to whisper that confession into Yuri’s ear on a roof at midnight because he couldn’t show that kind of weakness to anyone else.

Victor who was alone and who didn’t want to be any longer.

Victor who Yuri loved so much his heart felt like it crumbled to dust when he thought about a life that no longer had Victor in it.

He couldn’t live without Victor.

Even if he never set foot on a public stage ever again for the rest of his life, he knew in that moment he wouldn’t care. Dancing had been about so much more than himself for so long, Yuri had almost forgotten how this felt, dancing for the sake of it. Dancing because it made him happy and he had a story to tell for himself and not for anyone else.
Dancing because he was in love with more than just the steps or the music or the money. Because he was in love with the story he wanted to convey.

When he’d practiced this piece before, he never had been able to think of a good way for it to end. He’d tried everything he could think of, arms raised up to the ceiling or hugged tight to his body. He’d ended up on his toes, his knees, flat out on the floor, but nothing had ever felt right.

This time as he came out of the last set of dizzying spins, his body moved into place as though it had known the proper ending pose the whole time.

Arm outstretched and head turned, reaching for what he knew was waiting for him if he would only get up the courage to reach out and actually take it.

To invite in his invisible partner at long last and know that neither of them ever had to be alone again.

Victor.

As he stood there with his chest heaving and sweat dripping down his face, Yuri almost thought he saw Victor standing there just beyond the tips of his fingers like some kind of mirage. Then, as he blinked the sweat from his eyes, the figure didn’t move away. Instead, it moved closer, out of the shadow of the wings and into the brighter lights of the stage.

Victor.

“Wow…” Victor looked almost speechless, eyes glowing a bright blue as he looked at Yuri softly. “That was so beautiful, Yuri, and I never thought I’d get to see you dance like that on this stage ever again…”

Almost as though he realized a second too late what he’d just said, Victor froze.

And Yuri’s world froze with him.
Uncertainty

Chapter Notes

So, so sorry this is so late. Life has been pretty rough lately and I don't have a lot of time to dedicate to writing like I have in the past. I'm hoping things will look up soon and I'll be able to get back into steady updates for my works sooner rather than later, but I can't make an promises... :(

That being said, I know this was supposed to be the last chapter, but I had to split it in order to make sure the ending was paced properly. So... Yay! One more chapter after this! :)

Chapter 30 - Uncertainty

Yuri took a deep breath and dropped his outstretched hand. His heart was beating hard, too hard. Hard enough that it felt like it was trying to claw its way out of his chest and fling itself towards Victor. Every piece of him wanted to run right into Victor’s arms and stay there, but he held himself back.

“Again? What do you mean you never thought you’d see me here ‘again’?” Even as every other instinct and impulse Yuri possessed screamed at him that it didn’t matter, that he needed to move, to let it go and simply head to Victor’s side where he belonged.

He wanted to, but his brain was stuck, caught in a loop around one, single word.

He was too far away to really make out the finer details of Victor’s expression, even with his contacts in, but he could still see how Victor’s face fell and the flash of pure devastation that flickered across it before he managed to settle it to something more neutral.

“Yuri…” Victor sounded beyond tired. He sounded utterly exhausted and a part of Yuri felt like he was crumbling even just hearing the pain in the prince’s voice. “I… I should have said something. I know I should have, but…”

“But you didn’t.” Yuri finished for him. It wasn’t said with any true bitterness, more a statement of fact than anything else, but Victor still winced. It took almost everything Yuri had not to also wince in response, but he somehow managed. “When? When did you see me dance here?”
“A few years ago. I accompanied Lilia to a production at her insistence. She always was trying to get us out of the palace and out into the world whenever she could.” Victor’s face melted some into a wistful smile. “I didn’t know who you were back then. You weren’t even on the program. Your name was printed on a little slip of paper tucked into the back with you listed as a substitute for the evening, but the second you moved out onto the stage, I couldn’t take my eyes off you… I still can’t.”

Yuri let out a loud exhale like he’d just been punched in the gut. Truly, it felt like he had. It felt like the rug had been pulled out from underneath his feet. The world had tilted onto a different axis, and hundred of other metaphors and similes that didn’t really matter because Victor had apparently known about him for years. Had wanted him for as long and Yuri hadn’t even known about it.

People said all the time that ignorance was bliss, and Yuri supposed that was probably true to an extent. Only, he wasn’t ignorant now, and he wasn’t sure what was worse; going the rest of his life never having known, or this new reality where he did know and still had no idea what to do with the information now that he had it.

Yuri had opened his mouth to say something, even though he had no idea what he even could say, but there was a loud bang that came from the direction of the lobby. It sounded like a door had been thrown open too hard and peals of muffled laughter drifted through the large, empty auditorium and reminded Yuri with a jolt that they were in a public space and there was no guarantee they would be alone for much longer.

Victor must had realized it, too. His expression instantly shuttered, lips pressed into a thin line and body stiff.

“The fireworks must be over now, or close to it. They’ll come looking for us soon.” Even with Victor obviously making an effort to keep his face blank, Yuri could hear notes of tension, sadness, and regret in his tone.

“If that’s not them already.” Yuri stated glumly. He was about at his limit for being interrupted when he was with Victor, especially right in that moment when it was more important than ever that they talk and not leave whatever this was to fester between them. “Victor, we…”

“I know, I know.” Victor stepped forward and Yuri stood still as the prince came to stand in front of him. “We have to talk. I… I’ll figure something out, work out something so we can get more than a handful of seconds alone. Until then just… Just trust me, Yuri. I would never do anything that would intentionally hurt you. I swear.”
“You wouldn’t. I know.” Despite what he’d learned and what the darker part of his anxiety wanted him to believe, he still trusted Victor. He was sure whatever reasoning had behind his decision not to tell Yuri what was clearly such a crucial piece of information, it hadn’t been done with any malicious feeling. At the very least, Victor deserved a chance to explain and doing it right then was not the right time.

By then the laughter from the lobby had gotten louder and Yuri took a deep breath as he held out his arms and took a hesitant step forward. To his immense relief, Victor instantly folded his own arms around Yuri and Yuri wrapped his arms as tight as his could around the prince’s waist in return.

The embrace didn’t last long, but it was long enough to calm Yuri down somewhat and to allow his heart to return to a normal rhythm. Enough to know that Victor wasn’t going to pull away from him for good, and enough to silently reassure Victor that Yuri would do the same. By the time Victor pulled back and rested his hands on Yuri’s shoulders, he was able to give the prince a genuine, if weak, smile.

“Alright then. We need to get ready to go back out there.” Victor grinned and quirked an eyebrow as he ran his hands up and down Yuri’s upper arms, which caused Yuri to force down a shiver even through the barrier of his dress shirt. “Where’s your jacket?”

“Oh… Um…” Yuri glanced around before he jerked his head towards the orchestra pit. “It’s down there somewhere. In retrospect, that wasn’t necessarily my best idea.”

“We should get it before someone shows up and tries to draw the wrong conclusion… Again.” Yuri could tell Victor was trying to keep his tone light, but Yuri knew him well enough to hear the undercurrent of frustration.

It was a frustration he shared, too.

“Here. Give me a hand.” Yuri released his grip on Victor’s waist and they both made their way to the front of the stage. Yuri crouched down and turned so he was facing away from the empty auditorium. He held up his right hand and looked up at Victor. “Help me down?”

“Of course.” Victor took his hand and held on tight as Yuri used the wall to lower himself down with his feet and free hand. “Got it?”
“Yeah, you can let go.” Yuri said as soon as his feet grazed the floor. Victor let go after a beat of hesitation, and Yuri bent his knees to absorb the impact from the slight drop.

“Aren’t there stairs or something you could have used?” Victor asked as he straightened back up from where he’d had to crouch in order to help ease Yuri down.

“Yes, but this way is faster.” Yuri called back up to him. “Ugh. It’s so dark down here I wish I had a light or something… Ah. There it is.”

The jacket was a little dusty from being on the floor, but Yuri was able to brush off the worst of it and the evening was basically over in any case. It would do until he got back into the lobby and could retrieve the thick overcoat Minako had procured for him before they had left the palace that morning.

He looked up at Victor, heart stuttering to a stop and the breath catching in his lungs as he caught a glimpse of intense hurt in his eyes before Victor noticed he was looking and covered it back up again. It might have only been a brief flash, but it made Yuri want to scale the smooth stage wall in front of him with his bare hands, wrap Victor in his arms, and apologize as he promised to never let him go.

Yuri was about to do it, too, when he heard Minako’s voice ring out from the back of the theater.

“For god’s sake, there you are. You almost gave the guards a heart attack.” Minako sounded particularly exasperated and Yuri cringed reflexively and ducked down deeper into the shadows of the orchestra pit. The next time she spoke, Minako definitely sounded a lot closer. “Have you seen Yuri? No one else seems to know where he went. I, naturally, figured he was with you, but if he isn’t we might need to start panicking a tad and really go look for him…”

“He’s down there.” Victor pointed downwards at where Yuri glared back up at him. From the stage he was easy enough to see, but he would have been almost impossible to spot from Minako’s angle unless he’d been pointed out or she had known what to look for. “He lost his jacket.”

“He lost his jacket and now he’s down there…? You know what. I don’t care and I don’t want to know.” Even from far away Yuri could hear his attendant’s annoyed sigh. He supposed he should feel lucky that Minako bothered to put up with him at all for the most part, but right then he was only upset and irritated. “Come on out, Yuri. We’re getting ready to tell everyone one last goodbye and head back to the palace.”
“I wasn’t hiding on purpose.” Yuri protested, even though he kind of had been the second he’d heard Minako’s voice. He climbed the short set of stairs that brought him back up to the main floor of the auditorium to find Minako standing by the first row of seats as she tapped her foot against the thick carpet of the aisleway impatiently. “I really was just trying to find my jacket.”

“A jacket which shouldn’t have been down there in the first place.” Well, Minako wasn’t exactly wrong, so all Yuri could manage in response was a subdued shrug. “Alright, both of you get a move on. I’m sure there will be a big to do with giving our goodbyes and it’s late enough as it is. Let’s get it over with so we can all be out of here before midnight. Some of us prefer to get our full eight hours in whenever possible.”

“I’m coming.” Yuri grumbled as he made his way to Minako’s side, hyper-aware of Victor making his way off the stage and over to them. He was also hyper-aware of the almost full meter of space Victor kept between the two of them, too.

It felt more like one thousand meters than only one and it made his very bones ache with the urge to close the distance.

He didn’t, though. Yuri knew if he tried and Victor rebuffed his attempt to close the physical distance between them, he would break down completely. Better to play it safe, even if that was the absolute last thing Yuri actually wanted to do in that moment.

Victor had told Yuri to trust him, and Yuri did, whatever his explanation turned out to be. Yuri knew he owed Victor the chance to give it at the first opportunity presented to him and he had to trust Victor would make that chance happen sooner rather than later.

That knowledge didn’t make the long, silent ride back to the palace spent on opposite ends of the town car hurt any less.

For the first time since he had arrived, he accepted the little, white pills Minako offered him at bedtime to help him sleep.

The last thing he wanted was to chase his thoughts in circles until sunrise. Worrying himself into a long night of no sleep had never done him any favors in the past, and it wouldn’t do him any good in the present either.

It wasn’t more than ten minutes or so after he’d taken the medication and laid down until he slipped
into a deep and dreamless sleep.

His problems would still be waiting for him in the morning light.

They always were.

~

Even though he’d slept well, Yuri still felt completely drained when Minako appeared to pull him out of bed for breakfast. She’d almost had to roll him off the bed and onto the floor before he managed to get himself upright enough to get moving.

He also didn’t want Minako asking awkward questions, much preferring her to think he was still overtired from two back to back long days. To that end, he’d bullied his protesting body out of the comfort of his blanket nest and turned his shower to freezing in the hopes of shocking himself more awake.

It must have worked enough, as Minako merely clucked her tongue at him as he dragged himself through the rest of their morning routine. He was sure she was able to tell something was wrong. Minako was far too perceptive to completely fool, but he must had managed to convince her that, whatever that something was, it wasn’t bad enough to need her intervention.

Unfortunately, Phichit never did have even the small amount of discretion and self-control Minako possessed and Yuri found himself cornered in the library immediately after breakfast.

“Alright, Yuri. Spill. What’s going on?” Phichit had waited until Yuri had sunk down into one of the arm chairs and had come to stand directly in front of him with his hands on his hips and a stern expression on his face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Nothing is going on.” Yuri wished Phichit wouldn’t loom over him, but he figured that the threatening nature of his posture had been a conscious choice on his friend’s part. Any other time it might have even been enough to get him to cave almost instantly, but this time it didn’t do much… Mostly because Yuri wasn’t exactly sure what was going on himself. “Phichit… Phichit, I don’t understand what you’re worried about.”

“What do you mean you don’t understand what I’m worried about? I’m worried about you like I
always am.” Phichit rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. “I know I was not imagining the weird frostiness between you and Victor after the show last night.”

“I’m pretty sure you were.” Yuri had never flat out lied to Phichit before, and he hated to do it right then. He hated to do it, but this was the one thing that Yuri would not discuss with his friend until he’d had a chance to speak with Victor. No matter how much he wanted to, or whatever good advice Phichit might have for him. “I pretty much don’t even remember most of what happened after the performance. I was basically half-unconscious I was so tired.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t explain this morning. Unless you want me to believe that you are still just that tired even right now.” Phichit didn’t look convinced, and Yuri hadn’t expected him to be. All he could hope was that he could figure out a way to get his friend to back off without hurting his feelings because, as much as he loved Phichit to death, he was not the person Yuri was going to have this conversation with. “You two barely looked at each other. It was painfully, glaringly obvious, since any other time you’re in the same room together someone would have to literally put a physical barrier between you to get you to look away… And that sometimes doesn’t even work.”

Yuri floundered for a brief split second for something to say that Phichit wouldn’t see right through immediately.

He didn’t come up with anything.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then it must have been bad.” Phichit dropped his arms. He no longer looked stern. He looked openly concerned and Yuri took a deep breath. “Yuri…”

“I don’t know if it’s bad or good or what I’m feeling right now. Mostly confused.” Yuri shrugged. “But you’re right that I don’t want to talk about it. It’s complicated and it’s… Well, this time it’s private. I’m sorry. I just can’t talk about it right now. I can’t.”

“Okay, okay. I get it.” Phichit didn’t look happy about it, but he did back away and he dropped down into the chair across from Yuri. “Did you get into a fight?”

“Not really? No, not a fight.” That much he was sure of. Perhaps it would have turned into one if they’d had more time, but, for the moment, it was a painful amount of awkwardness and not quite an actual argument. “That might almost be easier.”

Phichit huffed out a short laugh and he pulled his legs up and curled them underneath himself. “I
suppose it can be under certain circumstances. Are you… Does it have something to do with the end of the Selection? I, um, I may have heard something about JJ going home later this afternoon…”

“Hmm, I’m surprised he didn’t leave first thing this morning.” Yuri could tell Phichit hadn’t expected him to know that piece of gossip yet by the way his frown looked a lot more like a pout than anything else. “Don’t look at me like that. He told me yesterday he was only intending to stay until the he wasn’t needed to help with the festival any longer… And that’s a part of it, yes.”

And it was. It was a huge part of it, whether Yuri wanted to admit it or not. It was the way that not even twelve hours ago he had been so sure he knew how the Selection was going to end, only to have the rug ripped out from under him mere seconds after he’d finally felt like he was confident in his choice. Only to be flung back into the whirlwind of indecision once more.

That was the crux of it, really. He was so damn tired of not having the full picture. Of feeling like he had gained his footing, and then finding his feet slipped out from under him again. Every time he got his heart and his head together on the same page, something happened to send them spiraling away from each other once again and Yuri was one hundred percent done with it.

“You’ll figure it out. Whatever it is.” Phichit paused and Yuri was sure he was trying to figure out the best way to be supportive without pressing Yuri for information he didn’t want to give. Why Phichit had chosen today of all days to listen to him and not curiously press for all the things Yuri didn’t want to tell him, he didn’t know, but he appreciated it none the less. “You know, when I was younger, my brother and sister and I would sneak into the theater downtown and watch whatever children’s movie had come out. I spent a long time watching movies that always ended in happily ever after. The hero always gets their girl or boy, the prince or princess always shows up at just the right moment to save the day and sweep their love interest right off their feet.”

“My brother and sister would love everything about the film. They’d go on and on about the villain’s evil plot, or the costumes, or the songs that had been sung. They loved every little bit of it, but I always loved the endings the most.” Phichit smiled and tilted his head back, his eyes sliding closed. “I spent years wondering when I was going to get my happy ending. When my prince was going to show up and pull me out of my parent’s shop and into a world of magic and adventure and talking animals or whatever.”

They sat in silence for a moment that felt as though it lingered forever. Eventually Phichit opened his eyes and looked back at Yuri with a wide grin.

“This was some adventure, wasn’t it?”
“Yeah, it sure was.” Yuri shifted on his chair some and pulled his legs up underneath him to mirror Phichit’s position.

“There weren’t as many talking animals as I’d been led to believe there’d be, but I guess you can’t have everything.” They both laughed for a moment at that, and then Phichit sobered up once more. “I guess I figured this out a long time ago, but this was never supposed to be my story. It was a great adventure, but the happy ending never was meant for me this time around. It was meant for you.”

“Phichit…”

“No, I’m not done.” Phichit held up a hand and Yuri’s mouth snapped back shut. “I’ll get my happy ending one of these days. Who knows? Maybe I was going about it all wrong and I’m actually the prince that needs to do the ‘sweep the man of my dreams off his feet’ thing.”

“You, though. Man, Yuri, I think I’d be more jealous of you if you weren’t such a good person.” Phichit laughed and shook his head. “I still am kind of bit jealous, if only because I hope one day someone looks at me even half the way Victor looks at you. Ugh, and the way you look at him… I don’t pretend to understand everything that’s between the two of you, but I don’t think you can fake that kind of adoration.”

“It’s not that simple.” Yuri protested weakly. Yuri wished it was. He wished that was as simple as him loving Victor and Victor loving him in return, but it wasn’t. It never had been. Yuri had found a way to adjust to almost everything that had been thrown his way so far, but he didn’t know what to think about the latest twist that had cropped up.

That was the kicker, too. There was always going to be another twist, another turn, another secret that he was going to discovered around the bend. He was confident that with Victor by his side he would be able to navigate them all, but there was now a layer of doubt in his mind that hadn’t been there before.

Try as he might, he wasn’t able to gather together the confidence to vault over that hurdle. At least, not yet.

“I get the feeling that it never is. Life isn’t like a movie or a book. We don’t get the benefit of foresight, or rewrites. We don’t get to run a scene a hundred times and cut out what still didn’t work.” Phichit sighed heavily. “We don’t get to plot out where we go or who we meet or what we do with our lives. We don’t get to erase what doesn’t work or skip ahead to the more interesting bits, and that sucks. It really, really sucks… I don’t know what’s going on. Maybe one day you’ll tell me, maybe you won’t, but I do know that you are going to regret it every day for the rest of your life if
you don’t decide to stand up and try to fight for what you want. You can’t come back and try again if you don’t like where your story ends up and we all know there’s a lot more to the story after the happily ever after, but it’s that way for all of us. No one knows what’s going to happen even a week down the line, much less ten or twenty years from now, but I don’t think you’re going to regret a thing so long as you know you went down swinging.”

Yuri felt a burning sensation behind his eyes and his blinked rapidly in an effort to prevent any tears from leaking through. He swallowed heavily around the lump in his throat and pulled his knees up so that he could bury his face in them, the frames of his glasses pressing uncomfortably against his cheek bones, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

He took one deep breath and then another as he tried to calm his beating heart and shaking hands. Yuri was dimly aware of Phichit’s gaze burning into the top of his head, but it was almost a full minute before he was able to get himself under control enough to risk sitting up.

“Thank you, Phichit. That… That was exactly what I needed to hear.” Yuri grinned and Phichit followed suit. “It’s like you always know what I need to hear when I need to hear it. How do you do that?”

“Ha. As if I’d give up my secret to you? Then you might not need me anymore.” Phichit chuckled and Yuri couldn’t help but let out a shaky peal of laughter in return.

“I think I’m always going to need you.” Yuri said firmly, and he meant every single word. He’d never had a friend like Phichit before. Yuko and Takeshi had come close, but, at the end of the day, they had always had each other to lean on when Yuri hadn’t been around and Yuri had always felt a little like he was adding to their burdens when he would come to them with his own. With Phichit there was never anything other than acceptance and a solid shoulder to lean on. “I mean it, Phichit.”

“And I’m always going to need you. I know you don’t believe it, but you’ve kind of been my own rock throughout this whole deal.” Phichit set his feet down and stood up, gesturing for Yuri to do the same. “Come on. I think this is definitely a hug moment.”

“Definitely.” Yuri agreed and he lurched to his feet and into Phichit’s open arms.

No matter what happened when he talked to Victor. No matter what happened when the Selection inevitably drew to its end, Yuri knew that it had all been worth it. There was no longer even the smallest part of him that regretted submitting his application all those months ago.
It had brought him so much more than just the chance at marrying a prince. It had brought him confidence and joy. It had brought him closer to his new best friend and had given him friends with bonds that he knew would last him a lifetime, no matter how scattered throughout the world they might end up.

And, even if it turned out to have only been for a brief time, it had brought him Victor and love.

And that was something Yuri was never going to regret.

~

JJ did, indeed, go home that afternoon with as much fanfare as he could muster… Which, considering who JJ was, ended up being quite a bit of fanfare, including a lot of playing up the façade of heartbreak for the camera crew that had gathered to record his departure.

Yuri was sad to see him go. It had taken them some time, but Yuri felt like he had finally been able to make a connection with the other man and he was sorry that it had taken him so long to do it.

But he had more to worry about than JJ leaving.

He still hadn’t gotten a chance to speak with Victor.

Actually, aside from breakfast, which Phichit had been right when he observed there had been a bit of a chilly air to the proceedings, he hadn’t seen Victor all day. The prince had been absent from lunch, taking the meal with JJ in preparation for him to leave once the meal was done, and he had been missing from dinner, too. Mila had said he was trapped in a meeting with his father, who had also been absent, but Yuri couldn’t help worrying Victor was taking any excuse he could find to avoid him.

With Victor and the king missing and JJ not there to antagonize Yurio, dinner was quiet and uneventful. He spent most of it talking with Chloe, Chris, and Phichit. They were starting to get excited for the Christmas holiday, and Yuri tried to let some of their good humor cheer him up as well.

It was only partially successful, and Yuri found himself flagging some by the time they had been dismissed to have free time for the rest of the evening.
Yurio was pulled away by his stepmother, who muttered something about making up for a missed tutoring session under her breath as they left. Mila caught sight of them as soon as they made the hall and latched onto Chloe, asking her if she had a minute to go over a prospective visit from her family for the signing of the new treaty in the summer and began peppering her with questions before they’d even gone a few steps towards one of the smaller conference rooms close to the Dining Hall.

“Hey, Chris and I are going to head to the Entertaining Room and play cards for a bit. Do you want to come?” Phichit had turned from where he was already following Chris down the hall to look back at Yuri who shook his head in response. “Are you sure? It’ll be fun.”

“I’m sure.” Yuri confirmed. “I want to spend some time in the studio tonight before we get super busy preparing for the ball.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s a good idea.” Phichit grinned and waved. “Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find us.”

Yuri acknowledged his friend’s invitation with another nod and he waved as Phichit spun around and bounced down the hall to catch up to where Chris had been waiting for him.

Then he turned himself and made his way to the door that would lead him the closest to the studio, not wanting to waste any time going back to his room for a proper coat to battle the December wind.

It felt almost good to sprint through the icy night. Even though his skin was chilled by the time he’d fumbled through the lock and managed to get the solid wood door closed firmly behind him, his muscles were warm and his heart was beating so hard. It was nothing at all to rip off the lightweight sweater he’d been wearing and kick his shoes off. Easy enough to untuck the plain sky blue T-shirt he’d been wearing underneath, roll his shoulders back, and launch into a lightening fast series of spins and turns.

He’d felt on edge for what felt like weeks. Although perhaps it had been longer than that. Perhaps it had been more like years. Maybe he’d always been that way, and had never noticed or paid attention, caught up as he was in trying to balance doing what he loved with his other responsibilities.

There was no music, but he didn’t care. Not only did he not need it, he didn’t want it. There was nothing practiced or rehearsed about his movements. He didn’t care to refine the lines of his arms, the arch of his back, or the extension of his legs. All he cared about was the next breath in, the next
exhale out, pushing the burning in his lungs and muscles to the back of his mind for as long as he could manage.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d been at it without the changing of songs to keep the time. The time didn’t matter anyway. All he cared about was getting all his restless energy out before he burst. It could have been minutes or hours, or anything in between until each breath came harsher than the last. Until his vision blurred and each step was less grace and more pure effort.

Eventually he drew to a stop in the middle of the floor, arms wrapped tight around himself and chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath. Despite the ache in his muscles and tendons, he felt good. Centered and calm.

“If you keep showing up like this, I’m going to start thinking you’re stalking me.”

Yuri turned his head to the side just enough so he could catch Victor’s eyes in the mirror. The prince startled some from where he was huddled by the door and Yuri saw some of the blood drain out of his face.

“I… I didn’t think…”

Yuri smiled at Victor’s stuttering. For once he was too tired to worry about overthinking either his reaction or Victor’s.

“It’s fine. If I didn’t mind you watching, I would have stopped as soon as you came in.” Yuri inhaled as deeply as he could before he let it go and turned to look at Victor without the mirror between them. “I felt the cold wind come in with you when you opened the door.”

“I’m still sorry. I should have announced myself… I just… I can’t help it sometimes. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of watching you dance.” Victor said the words so earnestly that something pinged inside Yuri’s heart. The breath he’d worked so hard to take rushed out of him fast enough that he felt dizzy again for a second. “Yuri…”

“We still have to talk, Victor.” Yuri hadn’t wanted to interrupt Victor, but he knew if he didn’t then he might convince himself to let it go once again. Push it back to another day, and then another, and then another until he’d run out of time and they never talked about it at all.
Once upon a time, Yuri would have done it that way. Wouldn’t have even thought twice, but he was different now. He still wasn’t sure if the change was a good one or a bad one, but he did know that he owed it to them both to refuse to run away this time.

“You’re right, we do. That’s why I came looking for you actually… But not here. I don’t want to do it here.” Victor offered up a grin that was about half of its usual intensity. “I know it’s not likely this late in the evening, but there is still a small chance someone could walk in.”

Yuri nodded and moved to grab his sweater up off the floor. He draped it over his shoulder, still too hot to put it on even though he knew it was hovering close to freezing outside and toed on his shoes, ignoring the loose laces for the time being.

“Where else can we go?” Yuri asked hesitantly. The only other place they’d ever been where they had been able to be reliably uninterrupted was the fountain tucked away in the corner of the garden where nobody else ever went. Neither Yuri nor Victor were anywhere close to being dressed appropriately for a long conversation outside in the throes of winter and, since Victor didn’t seem to have brought any coats with him, Yuri was certain that was not the place the prince had in mind.

“There is one place, but we’re going to have to be quick and we’re going to have to be quiet.” Victor held out a hand for Yuri that he took immediately, much to Victor’s obvious joy. “Otabeck can only keep everyone distracted and the path clear for so long.”

“Otabeck?” Yuri fell into step easily behind Victor as they rushed outside, pausing only for a second or two in order to lock the door to the studio behind them as they went.

“Yeah, he likes it when I owe him favors, and I trust him not to ever say anything about helping me tonight, so…” Victor shrugged as he glanced back at Yuri with a bright smile than before. “Let’s just say where we’re headed is not somewhere you’re allowed to be, but I don’t care. It’s the only place I know that is completely private, so that’s where we’re going to have to go.”

“And where’s that?” Yuri asked as they rushed through the darker shadows between the studio and one of the back doors of the palace.

Victor paused at the threshold of the door and placed a finger over his lips. “You’ll see, but we do need to be quiet. You’ll understand when we get there, but it is very, very important that no one sees us right now, okay?”
Yuri nodded to show he understood and they hurried into the palace.

Victor led the way, and Yuri stayed close behind him, hand wrapped firmly in Victor’s. After spending so long in the palace, Yuri was very familiar with even the most infrequently used back corridors, but he couldn’t guess where they were headed. It almost looked like they were heading towards the residential areas.

There was a narrow stairwell that Yuri had used often when he was slipping back to his room from the studio late at night when he wasn’t supposed to be out of bed, but Victor didn’t stop on the second floor where all the guest rooms were. He kept going up to the third floor and Yuri suddenly understood exactly why there was a need for all the secrecy and silence.

His suspicion was confirmed as they tiptoed down a much wider hall and through a set of doors that lead into a modest sitting room complete with couches, armchairs, heavy wood tables, bookshelves, and a small television next to a coffee maker. His rooms might not have one, but Yuri could tell what a personal sitting room looked like when he saw one and he knew that the fact that they were on the third floor meant it was most likely Victor’s.

It also helped that Makkachin had jumped up from off of on top of a pile of blankets on the couch closest to the door and had immediately launched himself at them.

“I am definitely not supposed to be here.” Yuri said with a laugh as he dropped Victor’s hand in favor and kneeling down and accepting a slobbery greeting from the poodle.

“No, but neither is anyone else without my express permission.” Victor pointed out as he reached out to give Makkachin a thorough scratch behind the ears even as Yuri still had his arms wrapped around the poodle’s shoulders. “Granted, Minako has never exactly followed that rule, but I don’t have anything scheduled until eleven o’clock tomorrow and she never goes to the nuclear option with me these days unless I haven’t appeared within fifteen minutes of any given meeting’s start time. Which means we should be safe enough.”

“She might come looking for me if I don’t turn up for a reasonable bedtime.” As much as Yuri hated to admit it, it was the truth. Minako had an uncanny knack for finding him whenever she needed to find him, no matter where he was.

“That’s where Otabeck comes in. I’m not entirely sure what he’s going to do or how he’s going to do it, but he knows to keep everyone as far away from these rooms as he can.” Victor straightened up and shrugged. “I didn’t ask for details. I’m a firm believer in plausible deniability.”
“Fair enough.” Yuri hefted himself to his feet, subtly stretching out the muscles in his legs as he went. It hadn’t exactly been the best idea he’d ever had to jump into dancing without taking the time to stretch either before or after, but it wasn’t the worst soreness he’d ever had and this was more important. “So…”

“Yeah, um… Maybe we should sit down…?” Victor gestured vaguely towards the couch that didn’t contain Makkachin’s pile of blankets.

Yuri had never felt so awkward before in his entire life as he did sitting at one end of a couch in Victor’s sitting room and it hurt more than he ever thought it would. Even back in the beginning when they’d barely known each other and Yuri had been totally unsure, he had never felt truly awkward with Victor. Embarrassed and flustered, yes, but never awkward, and it was a physical pain every second it continued.

“Victor, I…”

Yuri tried to launch into something close to an apology, but he’d barely opened his mouth when Victor cut him off with a quick shake of his head followed by reaching out to grab Yuri’s hand and hold it tightly.

“You don’t have to apologize to me.” Victor said softly. “I should be apologizing to you. No, neither one of us should be in a position to have to apologize at all because I should have told you months ago, but I didn’t and that’s my fault, not yours.”

“Why didn’t you?” Yuri swallowed heavily and paused for a moment so they could shift around where Makkachin was trying to jump up to join them. As soon as the dog had settled with his head in Yuri’s lap and their joined hands resting between his shoulders blades, Yuri asked his question again. “Why?”

“I was scared. It took me so long to impress you the first time… I kept telling myself to say something. I must have let a hundred moments pass by because every time I opened my mouth to say something, nothing came out.” Victor ran his thumb over the ridges of Yuri’s knuckles. “The worst thing I could ever imagine was driving you away again… I couldn’t… I don’t think I would have been able to bear that. So, I was stupid and I didn’t say anything.”

“Victor…” Yuri let out the breath he’d been holding. “I’m not mad… Well, I was, but I’m not anymore. I just… I just need to know… You knowing who I am, watching me dance for so long…
Is that…?"

“Is that why I’m here?”

The silence between them lasted barely longer than a second. Enough for Yuri’s heart to beat a handful of times and for Victor to let out a harsh gasp and shake his head so violently that his silver bangs swished back and forth across his forehead.

“No! No, Yuri, you have to believe me. I had no idea you’d even applied. The only person I knew about going into the Selection broadcast was Chris. You have to believe me. I was completely surprised when they announced your name.” Victor smiled sheepishly. “It was a good surprise, though, I won’t pretend it wasn’t.”

There was another moment of silence, one where Victor shifted around on his end of the couch in an uncharacteristic display of nervousness.

“I think I should start from the beginning…”

“The beginning is never a bad place to start.” Yuri joked, trying desperately to lighten the mood somewhat. It half worked, as Victor’s frown softened some. It wasn’t quite a smile, but it was warmer and some of the tension between them drained away.

“No, no it’s certainly not.” Victor rose to his feet, dropping Yuri’s hand as he motioned for Yuri to follow him towards the righthand side of the room.

Yuri hadn’t paid too much attention to the sitting room when he’d first come in, only enough to notice it was comfortable and clean. He’d been too focused on Victor and his own unease to take a good look around, but now he focused on what he’d missed the first time around.

There were three doors, not counting the one they’d come through from the hall, two to the right and one to the left. The back wall of the room was taken up by three large windows, the dark grey curtains pulled tightly shut. One of the doors to the right had been left slightly ajar and Yuri glimpsed a desk stacked high with papers and folders, with what looked to be a laptop closed in the center. There was an empty plate and a crumpled napkin along with a mug sitting on one corner. Obviously, it was a private office that Victor must have spent quite a bit of time in.
It was the second door Victor stopped in front of, though. This one was closed completely and Yuri stood at Victor’s side as the prince stared down at the bright, polished handle.

“I don’t ever go in here anymore. I haven’t even seen this door open in years. I’m sure someone comes in and dusts from time to time, but they do it when I’m not around.” Victor paused and Yuri waited, barely daring to breathe in case he accidentally ruined the moment. Finally, Victor shook his head and looked away from the door handle and back at Yuri. “This door has been here ever since I moved out of the nursery and into these rooms. I thought it was fun, at first. For a long time, I thought it was just an extra room that I could use for whatever I wanted. I used to keep toys in it and I’d sneak back here in the middle of the night when all my attendants were asleep to play in peace. When Chloe came to visit, we’d have sleepovers in there and we’d stay up way past our bedtimes talking and laughing in the dark.”

“Then I got older and I found out what it was really for and I stopped going in there. For most of my teenage years I pretended it didn’t exist. Minako stopped any maids from going in when I might be around to see them come and go. For all intents and purposes, it could have been a broom closet for all I cared, or a door that only opened up to a brick wall.” Victor reached out and turned the handle in one smooth move. The door swung open and Victor had grabbed Yuri’s hand again before it even stopped moving. “But, no matter how much I ignored it, it never went away…”

Victor motioned for Yuri to go first, and he pulled Victor along behind him with their joined hands as he did.

The room was large, with thick carpets and even thicker drapes. Yuri blindly reached for the light switch, finding it on the wall beside the door with his free hand. The second the lights flicked on, the dark shapes resolved themselves into something much more familiar. He could tell that underneath the white sheets were furniture. Chairs and tables and a massive four-post bed in the center. The bookshelves against the far wall were clean and the door to the closet was open, showing rows upon rows of empty hangers. To the left the bathroom door was open and Yuri could see dark, marble tile and a huge porcelain tub.

“My bedroom is on the other side of the sitting room.” Victor explained as Yuri stared wide-eyed at one side of the room and then the other. “This room was meant for my future spouse. It’s been sitting here waiting for someone to move in since before I was even born.”

“And you ignored it?” Yuri asked, not with any judgement, but because he truly wanted to understand.

“It probably wasn’t the healthiest choice, I agree, but I didn’t know what else to do.” Yuri could see that Victor watched him carefully as he continued to glance around the empty room. “I couldn’t even begin to imagine the kind of person I’d one day like to see sleeping in these rooms, so I just didn’t
think about it. I guess I secretly hoped if I ignored it, then it would somehow all go away. That maybe one day someone would bring up my Selection and I would order them to forget about it and they would. I knew it would never work, but I still hoped.”

“Victor…”

“I was kind of depressed for awhile when I got older. Everyone around here always wanted something from me and it felt like I was never able to do anything one hundred percent right no matter how hard I tried. It got to the point where I’d finally had enough.” Victor pulled Yuri closer and Yuri went without a second’s hesitation. Victor dropped his hands and wrapped his arms around Yuri’s waist, standing so close that his broad chest was pressed flush against Yuri’s back.

Close enough that Yuri could feel his heart beating and every breath Victor took.

“I did what they told me to do. I cut my hair. I met all the people they said were important. I attended meetings and official functions with a smile on my face. I bit my tongue and I toed the party line because that was what everyone expected me to do.” Victor sighed heavily, the puff of air hitting Yuri on the nape of his neck and causing a shiver to course down his spine. “Everyone wants something. The advisors, the upper castes, the rebels… My father… They all think I’m something special, that I’m going to do great things, but sometimes I can’t believe even that.”

“You are, though. I know you will. I might not know what those things will be, but I know you are going to do them.” Yuri leant back in order to rest the back of his head against Victor’s shoulder. He slid his arms down so they were wrapped around where Victor’s were still holding him tight at his waist. “I’ve never met anyone with a heart as large as yours. Maybe other people can’t see it, or can’t understand it, but that’s their fault, not yours. They all have their ways they want things to be done, but doing it your way isn’t a bad thing, no matter what they might say to convince you otherwise.”

“Yuri…” Yuri felt Victor’s shiver against his back and he tightened his grip on Victor’s arms. “Yuri, I… Thank you… Somehow it’s like you always know exactly what I need to hear.”

“Yeah, well, that goes both ways.” Yuri closed his eyes and allowed every muscle in his body to relax against Victor’s solid form. “If you had been anyone else, I think I would have gone home that first week. Every time I thought I was through, you were there for me with a smile or a joke or simply just to sit there and remind me that I had the power to work it out if I wanted to. I don’t… I know I wouldn’t have been able to do half the things I’ve done here without you being there to support me.”

“Yes, you could have.” Victor protested gently. “You’re so much stronger than you know, Yuri. So
very much. You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

“I guess… I mean, you’re right, but I don’t think I would have, no matter that fact that I could have.” Yuri shrugged. “Without you being here, there wouldn’t have been a point. Trust me, there wouldn’t have been a point.”

“Hmmm.” Victor hummed softly against the shell of Yuri’s ear and they stood there for a long moment in comfortable silence.

It always felt good when Victor held him. Yuri had come to crave his touch in a way that should have scared him. Wrapped up in Victor’s arms, he felt more at peace than he had ever felt anywhere else. It felt like warmth and happiness and home. It felt like a warm cup of cocoa after a day spent out in the snow. It felt like Makkachin bounding up to him across the grass in the middle of summer. It felt like stretching out his tense and sore muscles before slipping into a warm bath. Like lying on his back on a spring night and watching the stars.

It felt like love.

“As soon as I announced my Selection I tried to picture someone in these rooms again. I still wasn’t brave enough to step in, but I would stand in front of the closed door at night and wonder what it might sound if there was another person shuffling around in here getting ready to go to bed. Or who would walk out of here in the mornings to meet me in the sitting room before heading down to breakfast.” As soon as Victor started speaking Yuri opened his eyes and tilted his head forward so that he could look at the sheet-covered furniture, the empty shelves, the closet full of hangers waiting for clothing. “I just… I couldn’t see it.”

Yuri couldn’t see it either. Even though he was standing right in front of it. He couldn’t imagine being curled up in that massive bed. He couldn’t see himself arguing with Minako about what to wear in front of that closet or sitting at the desk in the corner reading over proposals or budget reports. He couldn’t see himself on the floor in front of the bed stretching with earbuds in his ears.

“I hoped as I narrowed it down more, the picture would become clearer, but, for the most part, it doesn’t.” Victor flipped his hand around so he could grab onto Yuri’s wrists instead of keeping them flat against Yuri’s ribs. “I tried picturing each one of you in here, but the only person who ever really seemed to fit was Chris. Maybe that’s because I’ve known for a few years now that he was most likely the person who was going to be the one living here in the end… Maybe it’s… I don’t know. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I want that image to be you so badly, but it never feels right.”

“I know why.” Yuri said softly. He tugged at Victor’s arms until he loosened his grip enough for
Yuri to be able to turn around and look up into Victor’s hauntingly blue eyes. “It’s because I would never stay here.”

“Yuri…” Yuri reached up and placed a gentle finger on Victor’s lips to stop him from saying anything further.

“It’s true. I wouldn’t stay in these rooms.” Yuri removed his finger from Victor’s lips and ran his hands up around Victor’s neck as he buried his fingers into the short hairs at Victor’s nape. “I would stay in yours. I wouldn’t be able to sleep here knowing you were one room away… I would… I would want to be by your side, even if it wasn’t the proper or traditional thing to do. That’s why neither of us can see me in these rooms… Because I would be in ours.”

“Oh, god, Yuri…” Victor sounded like he’d been punched, his words breathless and rough.

Yuri wasn’t sure who started it, or that it even mattered who did, but in the space of half a heartbeat Victor’s lips were on his and they were kissing deeply. Chest to chest and hip to hip, there wasn’t even the barest hint of space between them. Yuri felt the blunt edges of Victor’s fingernails through his shirt and he moved his hands down to Victor’s shoulders and gripped so tightly he was sure he was leaving bruises, but he didn’t care. All he cared about was making sure there was nothing between them, not even air.

Yuri let every ounce of love he possessed out into the kiss in the hopes that Victor would feel it and understand even though he still couldn’t figure out how to say the words and he took every ounce of what Victor gave him in return.

Eventually they parted, though they didn’t move far, simply content to rest their foreheads together and catch their breaths.

Yuri wanted to leave it there so badly. He wanted to keep kissing Victor, keep holding him, tell him those three little words Yuri kept locked deep in his heart, but he didn’t. He couldn’t. They had taken a huge step in the right direction, but Yuri knew Victor’s story wasn’t over yet and they both needed to see it through to the end, no matter how tempting it was to take their reconnection at face value and move on.

Yuri had never done anything halfway before and he wasn’t going to start then.

Victor must have sensed it, too and he pulled back by a small fraction and took his hands off where
they had been resting on the small of Yuri’s back. He ran his palms from Yuri’s shoulders, over his biceps and up his forearms, until he could clasp Yuri’s hands in his own once more.

“Come on. There’s… There’s still one more thing I need to show you.”

Yuri nodded and followed Victor back out into the sitting room where Victor paused as Yuri freed one of his hands in order to shut the door to the empty bedroom behind him. The door swung shut with a definitive click and Yuri smiled softly up at the prince as he grabbed Victor’s hand once again. Neither looked back as Victor took them across the room and through the door to his own bedroom.

As soon as they crossed the threshold, Yuri hesitated as he took in the details of the room.

Victor’s bed was a mirror of the one in the room they had just left, but instead of a plain mattress, his bed was covered by a thick slate colored comforter and there was a deep grey canopy stretched out over the four posts. The head was stacked high with soft pillows and there was a pair of slippers by a nightstand that had an empty glass, an alarm clock, and a book with a blue bookmark sticking out of one end.

The curtains on the windows on either side of the bed had been thrown open and Yuri could see the moonlit garden in the distance, the bench underneath the willow trees where they’d first met gleaming silver in the night.

The rest of the space was neat, but clearly lived in. The bookshelves were full and there were pictures and other odds and ends placed in front of some of the books. Glass figurines, framed certificates, what looked like a few medals and other awards. There was a pair of loafers by the closet and some abandoned and crumpled black sweatpants that had been tossed in the general direction of a hamper, but that had been left to lie on the floor when they hadn’t quite made it in. The bathroom counter was crammed with jars and tubes and other products and there was a hairbrush that had been tossed onto the middle of the otherwise immaculate bedspread, as though Victor had been getting ready in a hurry and couldn’t have been bothered to return it to its proper place.

But what caught Yuri’s attention the most was the wall to the righthand side of the bed, behind the end table with Victor’s personal items on it.

There Victor had pinned up several promotional shots and what looked like the front of a few programs, all of them featuring Yuri in some kind of skin tight costume in various poses from the many productions he’d been in during the later half of his career.
“So, I, um… I have a confession to make.” Victor dropped Yuri’s hand and cleared his throat as he shuffled nervously from one foot to the other. “I might have been a little over-enthusiastic when it came to collecting programs and other, um, stuff in which you were featured. It’s… Well, Yurio always says that it’s a little stalker-ish…”

“I mean… Just a little.” Yuri took a tentative step forward into the room. “I mean, you never did like stand outside the back of the theater in order to stare at me like a creeper or something like that… Right?”

“Oh, no! No, I definitely didn’t. I was honestly too scared to even try if the thought had occurred to me, which it didn’t! It totally didn’t. I swear.” Victor’s face had turned a deep red and Yuri reeled a bit mentally at the thought that, for once, he wasn’t the one caught in the throes of embarrassment for a change.

Granted, he was sure he would be a lot more embarrassed once the shock wore off…

“Lilia offered several times to speak with the director and set up a time for me to meet you, but I always declined. I… I didn’t want to make a connection with anyone back then, no matter how heart-stoppingly gorgeous they might have been.” Victor rubbed the back of his neck absently as he looked sheepishly over at where Yuri had taken another small step towards the pictures. “Well, it was that and I didn’t want to break the illusion I’d developed for you, so to speak. I was terrified that once we met, you’d want nothing to do with me, or you would, but it would be because I was the Crown Prince and not because… Well, you know.”

“To be honest, I probably would have fainted if you’d turned up backstage or something.” Yuri could feel a small amount of warmth on his own cheeks. Enough to tell that he hadn’t been able to beat down a slight blush of his own. “I still don’t… I don’t understand why… Why me? I wasn’t anywhere near the best dancer at the ballet. There were so many others….”

Victor’s eyes softened some as he smiled at Yuri from where he was still standing in the doorway. “No, there weren’t. I told you, it’s always been you. Only you.”

“But…” Whatever else Yuri had been about to say was lost as Victor closed the distance between them in three long strides. The intensity of his gaze made Yuri weak in the knees and short of breath. It took everything he had to stay perfectly still and not immediately melt against Victor’s chest.

“It’s complicated, but three years ago, I wasn’t in a great place. Father had gotten remarried the year
before and that opened the door for everyone to start pestering me about when I was going to get married. Looking back, I’m certain it was because everyone had been excited about the prospect of my father having his third Selection and they’d shifted that excitement onto me when he put his foot down and refused.” Victor glanced over Yuri’s shoulder at where the programs had been tacked to the wall. “I’d already been helping Father with his duties for a few years at that point, but I suddenly felt trapped. It was like everything had become way too real all at once and I didn’t know what to do to make it stop…”

“Running away wasn’t an option. Following along blindly wasn’t an option. Fighting with them was exhausting. Father tried to help, but sometimes it was like he almost made matters worse. It was right around then that the treaty between us and Britannia was adjusted to include promising Yurio to a member of their royal family so he was in a snit and pressuring me to try and change it somehow…” Victor took a deep breath and reached out to cup Yuri’s jaw gently as he looked down into Yuri’s eyes, the pain on his face causing Yuri’s entire body to burn with the need to hold Victor tight and never let him go again. “I don’t begrudge Father his decision. He deserved to marry for love for a change, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t miserable.”

“And then Lilia asked Yurio and I if we wanted to get out for an evening and join her at the ballet. I jumped at the chance. For the most part, the only trips I would make were from here to the Parliament building and back again. She could have been taking us to the fish market for all I cared and I still would have been the first one out the door.” Victor’s thumbs moved to softly caress the sensitive skin on the underside of Yuri’s jaw and Yuri leant eagerly into the touch, eyes wide and focused completely on Victor’s story. “That’s when I saw you.”

“I’d barely paid attention to the opening number. If it weren’t for the fact that I kept the program, I doubt I’d even be able to tell you what ballet we were seeing that night. Then the stage cleared and you came out.” Victor bowed his head and closed his eyes. “I can’t describe what I felt in that moment, but it was strong. The orchestra could have stopped playing and I don’t think anyone in the audience would have noticed. It was as though the music was coming directly from you. I don’t… I don’t think I’ve ever been as happy as I was watching you dance in that moment in my entire life, Yuri. Not at that point.”

Yuri laughed then. He couldn’t help it. Nothing about the situation was funny and he curbed his giggles the second Victor’s eyes snapped open the best he could, but it was still about a full half a minute before he was able to stop them completely.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. None of this is funny, it’s just… I wasn’t even supposed to dance that night.” Yuri reached up and placed his hand gently over where Victor was still cradling the side of his face. Even without many details, Yuri knew exactly which performance Victor had been talking about. There weren’t many solos he’d had over the length of his career after all. “I was supposed to have the whole week off, but half the corps and almost all the soloists caught a pretty bad flu bug that got worse during the week. If they hadn’t been sick, you might not have seen me at all.”
This time Victor did let out a quiet chuckle. “Wow… Well, I’m almost glad they got sick, in that case, but I’m sure I would have seen you dance eventually and still have been exactly as mesmerized as I was then.”

“Maybe…” Yuri shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe not. I never did a ton of solos.”

“Yuri… Trust me when I say that there could have been a hundred dancers on that stage and I still would have only seen you.” Victor punctuated his declaration with a quick kiss that left Yuri’s entire body buzzing in a way that had become very familiar over the past several months.

The thing was, for once, Yuri believed him fully and completely. He never had been the best at receiving compliments, more likely to brush them off as someone exaggerating just to be nice than truly meaning it.

There was no questioning Victor in that moment, though. The prince meant every word and then some.

Yuri wanted to thank him. Wanted to pull him back down into a deeper kiss. Wanted to whisper against Victor’s lips that he wasn’t upset any longer. He wanted to say those three words that meant the world even though he’d never had the courage to do it before, but Victor, it appeared, wasn’t done.

“You kept me going. Whenever I started to feel too stressed out, I’d go with Lilia to the ballet and watch you dance. She must have offered to set something up with the Director for me to meet you at least fifty times or more, but I always declined.” Victor dropped his hand from Yuri’s face, twisting his wrist as he did so in order to grab Yuri’s hand fully in his own as he pulled them both down to rest in the center of his chest where Yuri could feel the steady thump of his heart. “It was stupid of me, but I was terrified of meeting you. I’d built up this picture in my head of what you’d be like and I was too much of a coward to risk it.”

“You were afraid I wouldn’t measure up.” Yuri stated calmly. He was about to tell Victor that it was fine, Yuri was sure he wouldn’t have been all that impressive three years ago, but Victor gasped and shook his head frantically before the words could come out of his mouth.

“No! The exact opposite! I was afraid you’d be just as perfect as I thought you were. I was afraid I’d fall for you even harder and then not be able to do a damn thing about it. You already had too much of my heart, even back then. God, if I had met you and then had to let you go… To have to go through this whole Selection knowing you like I do now and not having you here… Nothing having even a chance…” Victor shook his head one last time. “I wouldn’t have been able to do it.”
Yuri was speechless. Utterly speechless. It felt like shards of glass were stuck in his throat and he could feel the burn of tears threatening to spill out.

For it was worth, it looked like Victor was seconds away from crying as well. He heartbeat underneath Yuri’s palm had bumped up to an erratic rhythm to match Yuri’s own.

“There’s… There’s more.” Victor took a deep breath. “It’s not an easy thing for me to talk about, but you deserve to hear it. You, of all people, deserve to understand.”

Yuri nodded. He waited patiently for Victor to gather his thoughts and begin his story.

“It is not a particularly well-known fact, but my father and Lilia have known each other for a very long time. Since childhood to be exact. They didn’t meet often, but they shared a few of the same tutors, since, as Lilia wanted to focus on her dancing from a young age, she didn’t go to a traditional school either. About once or twice a month there would be a conflict with their schedules for their studies, so my grandfather had given permission for Father to be allowed to take a trip to the big library downtown and they would take their lessons together on occasion.” Victor paused for a moment, hesitant in a way Yuri wasn’t used to seeing him. “As they got older they got closer and… Neither of them like to talk about it, but they fell in love.”

“I don’t know all the details, but as they got older, Lilia grew more and more determined to chase her dream and dance. Her parents called in every favor they possessed and Father helped, too, when and where he could. In the end, she got her way, not because of all that, but because of her talent…” Victor had been avoiding eye contact since his story began, but right then he looked down and caught Yuri’s gaze, his eyes dark and intense enough to make Yuri dizzy. “I saw her dance only once, a few months before my mother died. She took me to the theater once since Father never wanted to go. I couldn’t understand why back then, but I guess I understand it now. For him, it was too painful. The only other person I’ve seen move with such grace was you. It would have been a crime to stop her from taking the stage and, right then, it made sense to me why she pushed so hard to go outside of her what was expected of her. She moved like it was the most important thing she’d been put on this earth to do.”

“Exactly the way you do.”

“I… She had stopped dancing long before the ballet picked me up.” Yuri bit his bottom lip and shuffled closer to Victor, so close they were almost breathing the same air. Underneath his palm, Yuri could feel Victor’s heart had slowed back down and it was a reassuring and steady beat that pulsed down Yuri’s arm and helped keep him tethered and calm. “They made us watch videos, though, all the time. Videos of old performances. I know it’s not the same thing, but you’re right. She
was amazing. Talent like that, passion like what she had… No one ever should have tried to stop her in the first place.”

“My father did.” Victor said softly. “When he turned twenty-three, he decided to hold his Selection. He begged Lilia to apply. He was sure if my grandfather saw her application, he’d decide to choose her, but she refused. She knew if they got married she wouldn’t be able to dance any longer and, as much as she loved him, she loved her career and her independence more. In the end, the Selection went on without her.”

“I think… I think it broke his heart. He knew there was a slim chance for her being Selected even if she applied, but the fact that she hadn’t wanted to take the chance…” Victor trailed off there and Yuri couldn’t stop a shiver from running up his spine.

Yuri was suddenly forcibly reminded of a sunny April day when he’d sat on a curb in front of his house with a packet of un-mailed papers at his side. A packet that might not have been sent at all if he’d been anywhere else on that day.

That thought had never scared him before.

Today it did.

Today the thought of how close he had been to never having Victor at all paralyzed him with fear and regret. They had come so close to never having what they’d discovered together and Yuri had been angry about Victor having seen him dance before?

God, it seemed so silly now that he’d ever been angry at all.

“From what I’ve been told, my mother didn’t care much that he’d once given his heart to another. I don’t… My memories of her are scattered, and I was so young when she passed that we never would have talked about those things even if I could really remember. From what I could tell, they shared some kind of love.” Victor smiled softly. “They were great partners, too. I know they were happy, in their own way. Even though Father never truly forgot Lilia and what she’d decided to choose in the end.”

“They were married for a long time before I came around. Father doesn’t talk about those years much, but Minako has told me they were as happy as they could be. Mother loved doing all the things princesses and future queens were supposed to do. She truly loved throwing charity events
and balls, welcoming foreign officials and traveling to other countries on behalf of the Crown.”
Victor’s smile faded somewhat then. “Lilia still doesn’t like those things, but she does them. Father
never was one for letting other people be involved in his decision-making processes. He doesn’t even
like me there most of the time, but he doesn’t have much of a choice where I’m concerned. I have to
learn sooner rather than later and learning by doing is the most efficient way…”

“He must have been thrilled to have us hanging around in your meetings for the past few months.”
Yuri joked and Victor did let out a quiet chuckle. The mood a little lighter, Yuri curled his fingers in
Victor’s shirt and shuffled the tiniest bit closer to him as though he hoped Victor would understand
through those movement alone that the last thing Yuri wanted to do right then was turn away and
leave.

“Yes, that has been a point of contention between us once or twice, but… But, well, I don’t really
care what he thinks about that. How he wants to handle matters is his business. I always knew from
the beginning, I wasn’t going to want to be like that. I’m…” Victor took a deep breath and squeezed
against the back of Yuri’s hand as hard as he could. “I’m tired of being alone. I’ve been that way for
a long time, longer than I can even remember, and I don’t want to do it anymore. Even before you,
before I knew the names of the Selected, even before Chris made his offer… I knew I didn’t want to
stand alone.”

“You don’t have to.” Yuri whispered. “You don’t ever have to be alone again, Victor. I promise…”

“Yuri…” Victor cut him off gently. “I… Please don’t say that right now, not until I’m done, okay?
Please?”

“Okay…” Yuri agreed with a small measure of hesitance. He still wasn’t entirely sure where Victor
was going with his story, but it was obvious that Victor felt like he needed to tell it.

“After… After the accident, we were all devastated.” Victor swallowed hard and it took him several
long seconds before he could speak again without a crack in his voice. “I don’t remember too much
from back then. I think I’ve blocked most of it out on purpose, but I do remember Lilia would come
here often at first and then, once things had settled more, Father would go out in the evenings
sometimes, staying out late and returning with a ballet program tucked into his coat pocket.”

“Father tried to protect me from the worst of it back then. I had always been an active child, I’ve
done everything from fencing to tennis to horseback riding… Pretty much any sport that didn’t rely
on me to be part of a team since my schedule was so varied between my tutors and other obligations,
and I threw myself into those activities because it was hard to be sad when my body was moving and
my mind was focused on returning my tennis instructor’s volley or not being touched by my fencing
instructor’s foil.” Victor ran his thumb over the back of Yuri’s knuckles again and Yuri curled his
fingertips even deeper into the folds of Victor’s shirt. “I found out a few years later that, about a year
after my mother’s death, his advisors at the time had been on him pretty fiercely to hold another Selection. He’d only taken the throne two years after I was born and they were worried about how Illéa would look with only a King and one young Crown Prince holding the throne… They wanted him to get married again. Perhaps try and have another child… With no brothers and sisters of his own, and only a distant aunt still living, they were worried about the line of succession should something happen to him or me.”

“It was too soon, but… Well, but what else could he do? He had more than himself and me to think about. He had to worry about the whole country. He didn’t get the luxury of taking things slow, of making sure he was really ready to make that commitment again.” Victor took a deep breath and there was a flash of something like pain that crossed his blue eyes in that moment.

There was a brief silence as Yuri let Victor’s words sink in and the prince looked as though he was struggling to figure out what to say next.

Yuri waited patiently even as something close to anger welled up within him. None of it sounded fair at all. Not fair to Victor and definitely not fair to the king. As logical as it was on the surface, Yuri almost wouldn’t have been able to believe anyone would be able to be so thoughtlessly cruel to another person, but… But, then again, he’d seen it firsthand so many times the closer and closer he’d gotten to Victor. Everyone wanted a piece of the crown prince. They wanted his ear, they wanted him to listen to their opinions and suggestions and do what they wanted him to do. Some of their motives were for the general good and some were more personal, but none of them ever seemed to bother to think that Victor was a human being himself and didn’t deserve to be seen as nothing more than the crown he would one day wear.

It was enough to make it feel like Yuri’s heart had been snapped in two.

“I don’t… No one has ever told me all the details, but I heard and saw enough to piece it together. Enough to know Father asked Lilia again to do what she had already refused to do once before.” Victor’s voice didn’t waver any longer but Yuri could feel his heart beating hard against his hand. He could feel the tremor in Victor’s fingers even as he continued to sweep the pad of his thumb back and forth rhythmically over Yuri’s knuckles in a gesture meant to comfort. “I don’t know what truly happened, but I got the feeling Lilia thought it was too soon also. She wasn’t dancing in too many productions at that time, but she was teaching at the ballet and she didn’t… She didn’t want to leave her life either, no matter how much he begged.”

“I had… Well, I had nightmares sometimes back then. Most of the time I would ring for Minako and she would come and tell me stories, and bring me down to the kitchen to steal cookies and tarts and keep me company until I was tired enough to fall back to sleep, but sometimes… Sometimes I just wanted my father.” Victor closed his eyes and grit his teeth, as though it was taking every ounce of his willpower to force himself to say what he wanted to say. “Sometimes I just needed to know he was still there. That he hadn’t left me, too.”
“Victor…” Yuri’s voice was barely above a whisper and Victor let out a shaky exhale as Yuri turned his hand over so he could grab Victor’s and squeeze it hard even as he pressed the back of it firmly against Victor’s chest.

“I don’t even know why Lilia was there that late… I never asked. I was too afraid of what Father would do if he knew I’d been there that night when I wasn’t supposed to be.” Victor opened his eyes and Yuri’s breath caught as he could see the shimmer of something that looked like tears in the corners. “The door to his rooms was closed, but they must have been in the sitting area and they were yelling…”

“She didn’t want to be here. She didn’t want to be trapped into a life she didn’t want to lead. She begged him to stop asking her to do what he knew she couldn’t.” Victor paused as Yuri waited patiently as the prince steadied himself and tried to catch his breath. “I know… I can understand why he did it, but he backed her into a corner and she fought back. I didn’t… I didn’t stay for the end of it, but I didn’t see her again for a long time after that. Not until after Yurio’s mother passed.”

“She still doesn’t want to be here. You know, she puts on a good front, says what she needs to say when she needs to say it, and she goes where she’s told when she can’t get out of it, but…”

“But she doesn’t want to be here.”

They both stayed silent for a long moment and allowed Victor’s words to fully sink in.

Looking back, Yuri supposed the signs about how the queen really felt were all there if he cared to look. How she never wanted to attend any serious meetings, how she had only ever really shown any amount of enthusiasm when planning something that would directly benefit the ballet… Suddenly all the double meanings in the conversations he’d had with Lilia before made even more sense.

“Is it true?” Victor whispered the words into the space between them and Yuri held his breath so he wouldn’t miss a single one. “Were you really offered your spot back at the ballet?”

“H-how do you know that?” Yuri pulled back just a fraction of an inch in surprise. Only enough to be able to really look up into Victor’s face, but he might as well have moved to the other side of the room from the hurt that flashed across Victor’s eyes. Even though he instantly wanted to throw his arms around the prince in order to wash that look away, he didn’t. It was always too easy to find himself wrapped up in Victor’s arms with everything he ever worried about pushed far, far away.
“Victor, how do you know that?”

“I wasn’t spying on you. I didn’t… I didn’t mean to break your confidence. I would never…” Victor let out a heavy sigh and took several deep breaths. “Yurio told me. He was… When he was hiding from the tour group he must have overheard your conversation with the ballet’s director… I know he didn’t mean to, please don’t be mad at him. He’s just… He’s just worried about us. In his own way. Even with his bad attitude, he doesn’t mean any harm…”

Now it was Yuri’s turn to take a few deep breaths in a desperate attempt to stop his thoughts from swirling around in a blind panic.

For the first time in his life, it was almost too easy to stop his more toxic thoughts from circling to the front of his mind and forcing away all rational thought. It was so simple to take Victor’s trembling hand in his own and give it a firm squeeze.

It was panic and terror and fear that he saw when he looked up into the prince’s eyes. All the emotions that Yuri felt so fiercely even when there was nothing to be afraid of at all.

They looked so out of place on Victor’s face.

“Yurio is right. They offered my spot back. My knee… My knee is fine. Almost completely back to normal and she knew it.” Yuri grabbed onto the eerie calm he felt and harnessed it as best he could, forced his own hands not to tremble and shake and his own voice not to waver or hitch. “Victor… I’m not going to do it. I’m not going to take her offer. I want to stay here. I want to stay with you.”

Even as he said the words some part of Yuri couldn’t believe it. As much as he thought about it in the dead of night when sleep eluded him. No matter how many pep talks he’d given himself or how many times he talked about it vague and shaky terms with Phichit or Mari, he still somehow never thought he’d be able to say it to Victor, but when the moment had come, he hadn’t even hesitated. Hadn’t even realized that all his back and forth and worry had been for nothing because his decision had already been made a long time ago.

His heart had known the truth and now his head knew it, too.

And so did Victor.
“Yuri… Even a few days ago, hearing you say that would have made me the happiest person in the world…” Victor sighed and smiled sadly. “In a way, it still does, but…”

“But what?” Yuri asked, his tone coming out much more defensively than he’d intended. Enough so that he flinched at the same time Victor flinched. On some level he knew Victor hadn’t meant it as it had sounded… Hadn’t meant it as a rejection, but the one thing Yuri had feared the most was for Victor to take plea to say and turn around and tell him to leave.

Victor might not have said those words, not really, but Yuri couldn’t help but feel them coming. Like the way he could feel the shift in the wind when a storm was brewing on the horizon.

“But I can’t do that to you. I can’t make the same mistake my father made, not where this is concerned.” Victor forged ahead through Yuri’s walls like he always had and Yuri felt them crumble to dust like they had been doing more and more the closer to Victor he had become. “Yuri, I would do anything for you. Anything, and that should scare me, but it doesn’t. Everyone wants something from me. Everyone… Except for you. The only thing you’ve ever wanted me to be was myself. What kind of person would I be if I didn’t want the same for you?”

“You’re worried I’m going to regret it. Choosing to stay here.” Yuri stated simply, and Victor nodded, though it looked like it pained him to do so. “What can I say to convince you I won’t?”

“I don’t know. Right now, probably nothing.” Victor admitted, much quicker and easier than Yuri thought he would have. “It’s barely been a whole day since she offered. You can’t say you’ve had enough time to really think about it. You can’t.”

“Would it help if I told you I’ve been thinking about it for a much longer time than just a day? I’ve known… Well, I’ve known for a few weeks now that my knee is healed, probably even longer than that, though it was only recently it was confirmed.” Now it was Yuri’s turn to take a deep breath and shift nervously on his feet. “Even if it wasn’t at the National Ballet, I knew I would be able to dance again if I wanted to.”

“You didn’t tell me.” Victor pointed out, his voice soft and his grip on Yuri’s hand strong.

“I guess we’re even, then.” It was a petty thing to say and Yuri regretted the words the second they were out of his mouth. Enough so that he instantly jumped forward before they could really settle into the small space between them. “I was going to tell you. Once I knew what I was going to do. Yes, I didn’t know then that I would be able to have a place back at the National Ballet, but I did know I could perform again, so I have thought about it.”
They were both silent for a long, tense moment. Yuri silently willed for Victor to understand. For him to realize that Yuri’s mind was made up and it wasn’t going to change. He silently prayed for Victor’s eyes to light up again with the warmth he’d gotten so accustomed to, but they didn’t. Victor still looked unbearably sad in a way that made Yuri’s heart burn even as he was at a loss about what to do to make it better.

“One week.” Victor’s words startled him enough that he almost jumped, but he managed to stop himself at the last second. Instead, he reflexively tightened his grip on Victor’s hands. “They want… They want me to make my final choice in one week at the Christmas Eve Ball.”

“I know.” Yuri all but whispered. The very same date had been looming over him for long enough that it would have been pointless not to acknowledge that he’d been aware of the deadline.

“I know you say you’ve made up your mind, but, please, take the week. Think about it, really think about it now that you have this offer. I don’t want… I… Just, please. Do it for me.” Victor placed a gentle kiss on the middle of Yuri’s forehead. “I have to know…”

“Okay.” Yuri softly extricated his hands from Victor’s in order to raise them both up to cup Victor’s face between them. “If that’s what you want, I’ll do it. I swear, I will think of everything. I’ll take my time and do it right. I promise I will.”

Yuri took in a deep breath and then let it go, looking into Victor’s blue eyes and steeling himself for what he knew he had to say next.

“I’ll do it, but I need you to promise to do something in return.” Victor blinked as Yuri said it, but he nodded after only a few seconds of hesitation. “Victor, I’m not Lilia. You have to let that go. I’ll take the week to think it over, but you need to think it over, too. You can’t lump us together like we’re the same person, okay?”

“You’re right. I promise I will remember that. I do.” Victor’s smile was a ghost of his usual one, but it still managed to make Yuri’s heart flutter in his chest none the less. “I guess… I guess we both need some time, huh?”

Yuri wanted to argue that point. He, after all, didn’t feel like he needed any time at all. Victor did, though, so Yuri didn’t say anything. As much as he didn’t want to let it go, Victor had already given him a lot that night, and it seemed to have taken a lot out of him if the way he sagged against Yuri’s body the second he’d finished speaking.
And he definitely didn’t want to fight. All he wanted to was to somehow figure out a way to make Victor understand what he was trying to say a lot sooner than letting another long week pass, but he couldn’t figure out how. He never had been one for words and he was sure words were what he needed in that moment. It was beyond the point where a gesture would help.

Deep down, he knew there were three words he could say that might tip the scale, but he was scared and he took too long to try and spit them out. Long enough that something on Victor’s bedside table started buzzing and the prince jolted and pulled away from Yuri in order to rush over and grab it.

“Shit. That’s the signal from Otabeck. Minako’s probably looking for one of us and he can’t delay her any longer.” Victor looked down at the pager in his hand as though he wanted nothing more than to smash it against the wall. “You have to go. Quickly, and take the same way we took to get here. It’ll be less suspicious if I’m found here and not out there with you.”

As much as he knew Victor was right, just being in Victor’s rooms was dangerous enough even if they hadn’t and wouldn’t do anything they weren’t supposed to, he still didn’t want to leave. He’d hoped when Victor had found him that they would have been able to come to a resolution, but it felt like they were further from one than ever before.

When Yuri kissed Victor goodnight back out in his sitting room, he tried to pour out everything he felt into the kiss. Tried to hold onto Victor as tight as he could, tried to grab onto him impossibly tighter when the pager buzzed again where Victor had clipped it to his hip and Yuri couldn’t avoid being forced to slip out of Victor’s sitting room and make his way alone through the dimly lit halls and back the way they had come. Alone this time.

He had one week. One week to do whatever he could to convince Victor he meant what he’d said. That he wouldn’t change his mind or regret his decision at some point in the nebulous future. A future that wouldn’t exist unless Yuri could figure out some way to change the prince’s mind.

Somehow, he knew it wasn’t going to be easy in any way, but that didn’t mean he was going to give up. He’d never given up when things had gotten difficult or messy in the past, and he wasn’t going to give up then either. Not when he finally knew what he really wanted.

Not when he was finally so close to getting the most important thing he’d never known he needed.

He had one week to figure it out.
One week and it would all be over.

One way or another.

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